

So You Now Have the Old Home Place

Part 4: Food Plots and Open Areas

by James L. Cummins

Grasses planted in right-of-ways provide cover for wildlife.



Planting native grasses in open areas is popular.

PHOTO BY WILDLIFE MISSISSIPPI - JAMES L. CUMMINS

This is the fourth in a series titled “So You Now Have the Old Home Place.” In our previous article we discussed roads, trails, fire lanes and bridges. In this one, we will discuss food plots and open areas.

The first step when considering food plots and open areas is planning. When choosing sites on your land to develop these, start by looking at overhead maps of your property and marking locations that seem ideal. Keep in mind that you need to look for areas with lots of sunlight. Once you have marked a few prime locations, visit those areas. Typically, look for small open areas with dense cover nearby that is easily accessible by foot or ATV.

FOOD PLOTS

Food plots are an effective method of providing food sources for game birds, rabbits, raccoons, deer, turkey and other species. Food plots are planted with corn, millet, wheat, rye, grains, sunflowers, legumes and other plants with high nutritional value for wildlife.

It is best to provide food for wildlife year-round by planting both cool- and warm-season food plots. You should attempt to plant your cool- and warm-season food plots in different sections. This will help to avoid removing

available food in preparation to plant the next season’s food plot. Also, be sure to plant a mixture of different plants in each food plot every season. These mixed plantings reduce the risk of losing entire food plots to poor weather, diseases and insect pests. They also provide a diverse food source and, as different plant species grow at different rates within a season, ensure that new plant species are available to replace those that have died out. Diverse food plots also attract a wider variety of insects, which are important to certain wildlife such as turkey and quail – particularly when they are rearing their young.

Every property is different so the job of food plot design is definitely not a “cookie-cutter” situation. Breaking it down to its most basic elements, you must weigh your goals, read potential reactions of wildlife and design a plan for each food plot.

SOIL TESTING

Once you have chosen a few potential sites for your food plots, it is vital that you have the soil tested. With the prices of specialty seeds and fertilizer, and the amount of time it takes to prepare the ground and plant a food plot, it is critical to measure the pH of the soil. If the pH of the soil

is incorrect then the food plot will be sparse or completely barren. So, before you even break ground or throw your first seed, test your soil.

There are several different ways to determine pH in your food plot. One way is to use a food plot tester. These give you a reading that you can take to your local farm supply store or county agricultural agent to help determine the amount of lime and fertilizer your plot needs.

SIZE, SHAPE AND DISTRIBUTION

So, how many and what size food plots do you need? If you have limited available acreage for plots, as I did, then you should be precise in your goals – what is most important to you: Attraction? Nutrition? Antler growth? Most people with extremely limited acreage tend to devote all they have to “hunting-time attraction.”

However, if you have plenty of ground so that you can seed enough acreage to do it all, then most of what a plot is used for is your choice. By what you plant, how you design the plot and how you treat the area, you direct the action.

Two of the most significant determinants will be topography and budget. Are you in a heavily-wooded area or does it resemble an agricultural

setting? Do you have natural open areas or will you have to manufacture open areas? In an agricultural area, it is very easy to find open areas to plant. In heavily-wooded areas, it can be close to impossible without the use of heavy machinery.

You should also carefully consider the shape of your food plots. Rectangular plots have the advantage of keeping distance-to-cover relatively short, while size can be increased as needed with added length. Rectangular plots also have far more edge than square or circular plots of similar size.

Because wildlife diversity and abundance is usually greater at edges, the more edge you have, the more individual species you are likely to see. In most cases, food plots should be distributed across the property to make them available to as many animals as possible and lessen foraging pressure on any one plot. Well-distributed food plots will also fall within more habitat ranges and therefore benefit more species. Generally, 1- to 5-acre food plots should comprise approximately 1 to 5 percent of your land area.

FERTILIZATION AND LIMING

Once you have broken-up the soil, it is time to apply lime based on the results of the aforementioned soil testing. Lime recommendations are based on several factors, the most important being the pH of your soil. The pH scale is from 1 to 14. Soil for food plots that is neutral has a pH value of 7.0. When the pH level is below 7.0, the

soil is said to be acidic; above 7.0 and the soil is considered to be alkaline. Having a high or low pH will affect your food plot plants' ability to absorb nutrients needed for growth from the soil. Food plot pH levels can be adjusted by applying lime to the soil.

The length of time that it takes for lime to neutralize soil acidity depends on the type of lime used. Liming materials differ widely due to variations in the percentage of calcium and/or magnesium and impurities (silt, clay, etc.) contained in the limestone. If your pH is very high or very low, then you may be advised to add thousands of pounds of lime for your food plot. Although this would be the ideal, it can be very expensive. If your budget will not allow for this expense, then it may be best to plant food plot crops that are better suited for your plots' pH level.

Now, you have broken ground and applied lime; you are ready to apply fertilizer. Many seed companies give specific recommendations, in the form of numbers, for the amount and type of fertilizer to use with their seed. But what do those numbers mean? 10-20-10 or 10-10-10 or 18-46-0 represent the percentage by weight of the three major nutrients required for healthy plant growth. These numbers are always represented in the same order: nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium (N-P-K). Most seed companies have the fertilizer recommendations printed directly on the label, such as: 10-10-10 at 300 lbs. per acre. This means you need to apply 300 lbs. of fertilizer to your plot that

contains 10 percent nitrogen, 10 percent phosphorous and 10 percent potassium.

When fertilizers and lime are applied to a food plot, many chemical reactions take place instantly as well as over the course of several months. These chemical reactions will determine how well the lime and fertilizers are used by the plants growing in your food plot.

OPEN AREAS

Many wildlife species benefit from open spaces. These open areas provide a variety of foods and cover types that may not occur on forested sites, such as: grasses, herbaceous plants, various insects, small mammals, berries, nesting habitat and sites for territorial displays and predator watching.

Properly planned open areas not only provide important wildlife habitat, but can also add to the aesthetic value of your property, serve as firebreaks and increase access throughout your property. Openings may be located along roads, right-of-ways and fence lines and in strips between different-aged forest plantations. You can plan to scatter several irregular small openings throughout your land or leave entire old fallow fields unplanted.

Various low-cost operations encourage the establishment and maintenance of herb and grass cover in these open areas. You can disk to break-up compact soils and, where grass cover is missing, you can seed clover or grass. Mow regularly to prevent the intrusion of shrubs and trees. Also, mow different

Wildlife Mississippi's Wildlife Habitat Seed Program provides winter wheat for food plots.

Things to Consider When Choosing Food Plot Seed:

? What type of game are you trying to attract to your food plot? Do you want to attract deer, turkey, quail or some other species?

? What is the goal of your food plot? Different types of forage are utilized by game animals at different times throughout the year. It is important to understand how and when deer and other game animals will be visiting your food plot.

? What will your soil allow you to grow? Some food plot plants grow better in slightly acidic soil while others grow better in alkaline soil. If you are not able to lime and fertilize, consider plants that will thrive in what is available.

? What is already readily available? If your food plot is surrounded by lots of corn and soybeans, planting more of the same will not attract wildlife to your property. However, if you are in an area void of corn and soybeans, then planting these may be your best choice.

? What is your geographical region? Planting seed varieties that are not meant for Southern states is not wise. Use plants that have been proven to grow in your area. It is usually helpful to consult an agricultural expert before purchasing your seed.

? What time of year are you planning to put in your food plots? Some seeds need to be planted in the spring while others need to be planted in the fall.

? Will you replant your food plots every year or do you want a plot that will last a few years? Some food plot seeds are annuals and some seeds are perennials. Consider how often you want to replant your plots when selecting seed.

areas at different times of the year to encourage a wider variety of plants and available mast. You should also disk established ground covers periodically to enhance species and mast diversity. To avoid the disturbance of ground-nesting species, such as turkey and quail, and to promote the growth of important foods such as partridge pea, ragweed and beggar weed, you should mow and disk during the winter months.

Landowners planning to create and maintain forest openings for wildlife may be eligible to receive cost-share funding for these operations under the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, a program conceptualized by Wildlife Mississippi and written into law by U.S. Senator Thad Cochran. Wildlife plantings also fulfill requirements for enrollment in the Conservation Reserve Program. Contact your local

U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service office for more information about these programs.

NATIVE GRASSES

Native grasses are being used more and more in return to the naturalized plantings now being favored throughout the country. Native grasses are the various regional and national grasses that were original to your particular area of the country. Many areas of the United States are being “reclaimed” using native grass and seed plantings.

Though there are many reasons why native grasses are a good choice for planting, an important aspect of native grass planting is the fact that native grass species have evolved and developed resistances to many of the problems that newer grass varieties



Shooting houses are a common sight in open areas and food plots.

PHOTO BY WILDLIFE MISSISSIPPI - JAMES L. CUMMINS

have not successfully been bred to handle. These native grasses are regional in regards to climate, a soil's acidity or alkalinity, insect damage, diseases and symbiotic coexistence with other plants in the surrounding area. Native vegetation is the logical planting to use in areas where plants or grass cannot or will not be maintained by high fertilization, soil additives, watering and insecticides. Fungicides are generally not needed because of the adaptability of the natives to fight funguses in some manner, or be wiped out. This makes native grasses an ecologically-friendly choice as well.

In the next issue of *Wildlife Mississippi* magazine, we will discuss farm ponds and small lakes.

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