Food Plots for Wildlife

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The planting of supplemental food plots for wildlife seems to be a practice that is welcomed by most landowners and land managers who are interested in wildlife management. A well planned food plot can provide as much as 4 to 5 tons of forage per acre. However, the maximum benefits can only be obtained if the food plot is a compliment to the native vegetation. Food plots should be available when native vegetation is lacking or is low in nutritional value. These “stress periods“ normally occur in late summer and late winter. September is the time to start preparing to plant cool season plots. The success of the plot depends on the land managers ability to correctly choose an appropriate seed variety, plant in a suitable site and use the correct planting procedures. Some considerations before you plant may include: Where should I plant? What should I plant? When should I plant? How should I plant?

Where: Best if plots are located adjacent to some type of escape cover and in good soils. If possible, use separate areas for warm season and cool season food plots. The size of the plots should be one to five acres for every hundred acres of habitat present. Several smaller plots spread throughout an area is better than one large plot. Long narrow plots are better than wide ones. Food plots should be fenced to exclude cattle with the bottom wire eighteen inches from the ground. It is not recommended to plant plots near public roads since they might encourage illegal hunting.

What: A combination of Wheat and Austrian winter peas works very well. Wheat is preferred over oats only because of its seed producing capability. Wheat tends to have a longer lasting erect stubble that will hold the seed longer into the summer. This seed is consumed throughout the year by many different bird and wildlife species. Many times in a dry summer condition, wheat can be left to stand all year and resprouting will occur by shredding and lightly disking each September. Clover plots are some of the most preferred, however special care should be taken in selecting the proper variety of clover to coincide with your soils pH. Many varieties of clover will reseed and have extended growing seasons that can possibly extend into the summer months. There are many commercially produced specialty mixes available that will work well, but often at a much higher price.

When: Planting of cool season plots should be planted September 15th through October 15th depending on available soil moisture.

How: Wheat and winter peas are fairly simple to plant; the site should be shredded and disked or tilled to create a clean seedbed. Approximately 25 lbs of wheat and 25 lbs of winter peas should be planted per acre. The seed should be evenly spread over the area by a commercial seeder or even by hand depending on the size of area to be planted. Seeds should then be lightly covered with a disk or some type of drag to insure ground to seed contact. The end results should be a planting depth around 1 inch deep. One of the most common mistakes in planting is getting the seed in too deep. Clovers should never be disked in or planted deeper than ½ inch deep. On well-prepared seedbeds or loose sandy soils, clovers can be planted directly on top of the soil without dragging or redisking to cover the seed. Clovers should be inoculated to increase nitrogen fixation that will aid in improving soil quality over time. Plots will

need to be fertilized correctly to realize the full benefit. Soil test should be taken to determine the lime and fertilizer requirements.

Finally: Food plots are no way a cure-all for poor habitat management. Without consideration of the native food source and cover requirements for wildlife, food plots will not provide the adequate nutrition needed by most wildlife species on a daily basis.

If you have any questions about habitat management on your property please feel free to contact me: Robert Lehmann, Texas Parks and Wildlife (979) 277-6297 or come by my office in the Washington County Extension Office Annex at 1305 E. Blue Bell Road.