

The Habitat Corner

DOUBLE-DUTY FOOD PLOTS

Year in and year out, we get more phone calls about food plots than any other habitat management tool. It is undoubtedly the most commonly used - and often overused - habitat management practice. Many people focus on providing planted food while ignoring necessary native foods, and escape, nesting or brood/fawning cover. However, wisely used, food plots can complement properly managed native field and forest cover types.

Food plots can increase nutrition beyond what is otherwise available, but without native vegetation management, these plots rarely meet their full potential. Native vegetation management techniques, such as prescribed fire, disking, herbicides, and timber management, can be used to improve the quality and quantity of naturally occurring food and cover. After all, 70 percent of a deer's summer diet is comprised of native browse and "weeds"- this is the time of year when bucks are growing antlers and putting on body mass, and does are lactating and raising fawns. Likewise, cover is generally more important for turkey and quail broods than planted strips of milo or corn. With a little creativity, you can maximize the effectiveness of food plots while enhancing native habitat and even farming efficiency.

Old fields can provide high-quality cover for a variety of species of wildlife. One of the best ways to maintain the cover in these fields is to periodically burn them. Disked or plowed firebreaks can be limed, fertilized, and planted in wildlife-friendly vegetation to control erosion, aid in controlling a prescribed burn, and provide high quality forage along field edges. Avoid planting green firebreaks more than a growing season in advance of your planned burn. Grasses (wheat, milo, corn, etc.) produce a thatch layer as they die that can carry a fire across your firebreaks. Mixed grass/forb plantings may also limit your herbicide options to control grass weeds in firebreaks.

Forest management is another key opportunity for natural vegetation management. Periodic harvest is important to maintaining a healthy, growing forest. However,

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logging operations often leave behind exposed skid trails and logging decks that can be a source of erosion. This erosion can degrade streams and carry nutrients off-site that would otherwise be used to grow the future forest. Poorly designed trails and roads may require reshaping with heavy equipment or armoring to repair, but many trails can be protected by erosion using food plot plantings immediately after timber harvest. Instead of fescue, orchardgrass, or ryegrass, choose cool-season grains such as wheat, rye, or oats, and annual clovers for winter cover. Millets and buckwheat

are good summer covers. Log decks can make great food plots as well, assuming they are in the right spot. Work with your forester and logger to plan these locations on the front end.

Field edges are a financial "sink" for farmers due to trees competing for nutrients, and shading crops. For wildlife, however, edges are prime real estate. Field borders planted to perennial clovers can provide year-round forage for wildlife, trap sediment, excess nutrients, and pesticides, and reduce the cost of operating unprofitable acres. Cover crops can be sowed



Clover, chicory, and winter wheat make an effective firebreak and provide nutrition for a variety of species. Cover on both sides helps protect foraging wildlife from predators and increases daytime use. Photo by Rodney Breeding.

on the rest of the field post-harvest to improve soil condition and fertility, while suppressing winter annual weeds. Whole field cover crop plantings of cereal grains, legumes, and brassicas can provide supplemental forage at a scale far beyond ¼ acre "shooter" plots.

Food plots should not be viewed as holistic habitat management. Instead, use food plots as complementary tools to enhance native vegetation management and other agricultural activities as part of your habitat management plan. A habitat management plan ensures that all habitat limiting factors are being addressed, management is conducted at the right time, and that the arrangement of cover and food resources makes sense for your species of interest. For assistance developing a habitat management plan on your property, contact your local TWRA Private Lands Biologist <http://www.tn.gov/content/tn/twra/wildlife/habitat.html>.

"Helping Landowners and Wildlife Through Habitat Enhancement"

The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency has Private Lands Biologists that will assist you in developing a management plan for your property and a strategy to implement it. See <http://www.tn.gov/content/tn/twra/wildlife/habitat.html> for who to contact for technical assistance and other useful information on habitat management and programs.