



## Food Plots: The Basics

by Matthew Springer

Photos courtesy: Matt Springer

### **Do I need a Food Plot for Wildlife?**

Food plots can create great hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities, but before you put the time, effort, and money into creating one you should consider several issues. Wildlife require three essential components to survive—food, cover, and water. Ensuring access to all of these components either on your or neighboring properties is essential for successful for any wildlife management. These components can be broken down even further, and should be, if you want to manage for an individual species, but focusing on those three overarching components will help you be a successful steward to the wildlife on your property.

Food plots should be viewed as a part of a larger wildlife and habitat management strategy. If your strategy does not include habitat management outside of food plots, such as ensuring multiple stages of plant succession in the area to provide more food and cover, food plots may have little to no benefits, even being detrimental in some situations. The first question you should ask yourself when thinking about installing food plots on your property should be, why am I putting a food plot in? Follow up questions should include, “Are the animals I am managing for food limited?” and “Are there any other major survival components lacking that should/can be addressed?” These questions are really meant to make you think about a holistic management strategy. If you manage a farm with acres and acres of row crops, forest management and/or native grasslands may be more important to focus your activities on to increase cover and fawning/nesting/brooding areas than putting more food into the landscape.

### **Site Selection and Plot Size**

If you come to the conclusion that food plots are a helpful management strategy, you should start taking stock of your property, the resources for planting and maintenance, and the locations that are available to install a food plot. There

are libraries worth of hunting articles on this topic, but in this article we will cover the basics to help you dive into it more if you so desire.

Taking stock of your resources and the size of the area(s) available to plant a plot. Then consider, the means you have to prepare and plant (tractor vs. ATV), which may dictate where or how large of a plot you can plant. If you live on flat ground with multiple options, the reason you are planting a food plot should dictate its size and placement within the landscape. If you are hoping to use this plot for hunting purposes, you need to consider how you will access the plot during hunting season. You will need a means to limit disturbing wildlife, roost areas, bedding areas, as you walk to and from the plot and will want to keep the plot smaller in size (<5 acres). If you are hoping to use it to feed or photograph wildlife, then placement and ability to see wildlife within the plot from say your kitchen window may start to outweigh other considerations.

### **Soil Testing and Remediation**

Once you have selected your site, the preparation of the site is incredibly important to the success of the food plot. The first step in the process will be collecting soil samples at the site(s). A soil test will reveal the plots soil pH level and the nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium levels in the tested ground. In most instances food plot site soils will require some level of nutrient correction, partially due to the locations tending to be in rough, secluded, wooded areas of the property. These nutrients can be applied in a variety of ways, from commercial agricultural equipment all the way down to hand tools. For more details on how to conduct a soil sample, please refer to the numerous extension publications that outline in detail the best practices for collecting soil samples. Refer to the University of Kentucky Extension publication Taking Soil Test Samples (AGR-16) or ask your County Agriculture and Natural Resource Agent for proper instructions.

## What Should I Plant

Determining what you want to plant in a food plot seems like a simple decision, but there are dozens of options of plants, and many of them can be combined to create even more options, all of which can be grown successfully within Kentucky. When choosing what to plant, take a multiscale look at the area(s) you plan on planting the food plot. Think not only about immediate the area that has the food plot, but what is in the general area surrounding it for a few hundred yards. Based on your assessment of the area, select a plant(s) that will help meet any other goals of the plot. If you want to use the plot for hunting purposes, make sure the plants will attract the species you wish to hunt to the plot during hunting season. If you want to use the plot to feed wildlife, you may want to select a mixture of plants to grow in the plot. These mixtures can and should complement each other and will provide a variety of food options to the species that will use the plot. Think of it as a buffet rather than a one course meal. Avoid planting species that are considered invasive plants in Kentucky, as you may create a bigger problem than you initially expect. No matter what, though, we want to make sure we are not planting any species that are invasive, potentially opening the door to more problems later on!

## Prep and Planting

The main steps of the planting process are straight forward, however the tools you have available will dictate how it is accomplished. First apply the necessary soil remediation based on results of the soil sample. Second prep the soil bed using one of the



*Above: Multiple options exist for spreading both your soil amendments and seed. The most important thing is that you get equal coverage over the planting area.*

*Left: Choosing the correct amount of soil amendments is vital to food plot success.*



*Though it is not a necessity to plant a food plot, a disk and/or cultipacker can help increase soil to seed contact. This is a combination unit, but there are multiple versions in the market that can accomplish the same task.*

completely prepped, apply seed to the plot. Make sure you pay close attention to the seeding depths and rates for your selected seed. If you have questions on methods to ensure your success when seeding, contact your county Extension agent.

## Plot Maintenance and Monitoring

After planting plots you cannot simply walk away from a plot and expect success. Weed control is going to be a big concern, especially for newly established food plot areas. Routinely check your plots (stop by every couple of weeks) to ensure that you catch problems early. Use the appropriate methods (chemical or mechanical) to control weeds while minimizing the impact on the plants you want in the plot.

You should also monitor your plots for use and consumption rates by your

variety of ways to prepare your seed bed for planting. Tractors, ATVs, backpack sprayers, even a rake are all potential tools for seed bed prep and planting. The overall goal is reducing or eliminating competition from existing vegetation at the site by chemical (glyphosate) or mechanical (tilling/disking) means. This will help prepare the soil bed to plant the seeds and maximize the seed to soil contact needed.

After the seed bed has been

targeted species. The easiest way to determine the production of the plot is to set up a few exclosures within the plot to keep animals from consuming any plant growth allowing you to see how much is being produced versus consumed outside the plot. Pair this method with a trail camera and you will have a good grasp on how wildlife are using your plot and if changes are necessary. For more information on wildlife food plots, Dr. Craig Harper, Professor and Wildlife Extension Specialist at the University of Tennessee has an amazing resource on food plots: *A Guide to Wildlife Food Plots and Early Successional Plants*. Craig A. Harper. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. It is well worth its cost (~\$60) if you are really interested in installing food plots on your property.

### About the Author:

**Matthew Springer, Ph.D.**, Assistant Extension Professor of Wildlife Management with the UK Department of Forestry and Natural Resources works on a variety of wildlife management needs for private landowners, farmers, and governmental agencies.

Cooperative Extension Service, Department of Forestry and Natural Resources, University of Kentucky, 209 Thomas Poe Cooper Building, Lexington, KY 40546; E-mail: mattspringer@uky.edu; Phone: 859.257.8633; Fax: 859.323.1031.