

Food Plots for Wildlife



The three basic components of wildlife habitat are food, water, and shelter. In Ohio, sufficient water is usually available to sustain wild animals through all seasons. Shelter (or cover) needed for protection, nesting, travel, and loafing by wildlife varies greatly in both quality and quantity throughout the state. In many areas there is ample shelter but unreliable food supplies. This is especially true during the winter when the animals' energy demand to maintain body temperature is highest. Animals that do not find enough food during harsh winter weather can become weakened and more susceptible to predation and disease. They may also be in poor condition for reproduction the following spring.

In agricultural areas where fall plowing is uncommon, enough grain is usually available over the winter to feed wildlife. However, food shortages can occur when waste grain is not adjacent to adequate winter cover or becomes unavailable under heavy snow cover. Most species of farmland wildlife will not travel far from winter cover to feed during bad weather. If food is not within 20-30 feet of cover, it may be out of reach to wildlife when it is needed most. Fall plowing can also eliminate winter food in some areas.

PROVIDING FOOD FOR WILDLIFE

Farmers can ensure an adequate food supply for rabbits, pheasants, quail, and other farmland wildlife by identifying good winter cover sites on their farm and adjusting their farming practices to provide food next to these sites.

Waste Grain

The simplest method of providing food for wildlife is to leave waste grain on the ground along with

crop residues. Waste grains from row crops such as corn and soybeans will feed wildlife until winter snow and ice make them unavailable.

If fall tillage is used, leave a 30-foot border of undisturbed crop ground beside protective cover. This way some waste grain will be available to wildlife.

Standing Crops

A better method of providing food for wildlife is to leave some crops unharvested next to good winter cover.

Corn is the most important agricultural grain eaten by wildlife. Corn also furnishes excellent cover for farmland wildlife during late summer, as well as winter cover in fields that are not fall plowed or clipped for silage. To ensure a winter-long supply of corn for wildlife, leave four to six rows of standing corn along the edge of a field adjacent to brushy cover or a wetland. There is no need for herbicide application or cultivation in these wildlife rows. Additional food and cover benefits are derived for wildlife if annual weeds such as foxtail, lamb's-quarters, smartweed, and common ragweed are allowed to grow among the rows of standing corn. Farmers who leave a few rows of corn for wildlife usually find that the overall yield from their fields is not measurably reduced, since the outer rows generally produce the least corn.

Soybeans, although less important than corn, are a high protein food for farmland wildlife such as cottontail rabbits and bobwhite quail. Leave 5-10 rows of soybeans unharvested along the entire length of one or more field edges. Select sides of the field that adjoin fencerows, brushlands, woodlots, or wetland areas. Herbicide use should be avoided on these rows to allow annual weeds to grow. Weeds in soybeans are even more important as food and cover for wildlife than they are in standing corn.

Small grains such as wheat, oats, barley, and rye are less important agricultural crops eaten by wildlife. They do, however, have some food value and are far better than row crops as cover for nesting, brood rearing, and roosting. Ring-necked pheasants may nest in winter wheat when hayfields and pastures are unavailable. Bobwhite quail often feed and roost in oat fields during fall and early winter. Wildlife benefit the most when a 15- to 30-foot strip of small grains is left unharvested adjacent to a brushy fencerow, field border, or wetland area. If you leave strips of small grain as food for wildlife, you can save money and provide additional benefits in terms of food and cover by not using herbicides or cultivating the food plot site.

Planted Food Plots

A third method of providing food for wildlife is to plant one or more types of annual grains in a plot established specifically for wildlife. Food plots may be the only alternative in areas where few row crops are grown. They can also be used to provide preferred food items to manage for specific kinds of wildlife. For example, corn can be planted to attract deer while Japanese millet may be appropriate for waterfowl.

Where protective cover is lacking, food plots should be planted in large blocks up to several acres in size. Corn and/or sorghum should be a major component. In a large block, the outer rows will protect the inner food patch from the accumulation of blowing snow, and stalks and stems are less likely to be blown down. Snow traps can be created to protect food plots. See Figure 1.

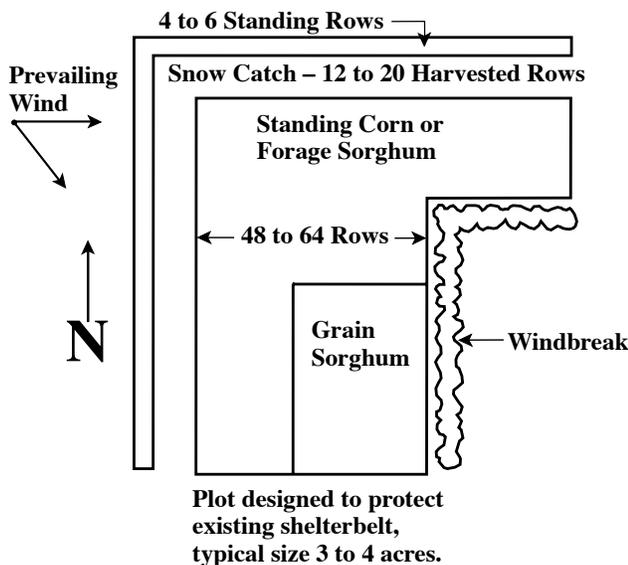


Figure 1.

Pure stands of corn, soybeans, sorghum, millet, or sunflowers produce the most food, but a mixture of two or more of these crops will attract a greater variety of wildlife. Most food plots should be seeded in spring, between May 1 and June 15. The seeding date will vary depending upon the combination of annual grains used.

A food plot can be any size, but it should be at least 1,000 square feet. No more than a $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ acre of food plot is usually needed for each 20 acres of land. If a food plot is expected to provide winter cover then plots of an acre or more are necessary.

The best food plots are usually long strips planted adjacent to good winter and/or escape cover such as a brushy fencerow, field border, windbreak, woodland edge, or wetland. Strip width can vary, but the wider the strips, the more food and cover created for wildlife. See Figure 2. The closer the food plot is to good dense cover, the more use it will have by wildlife.

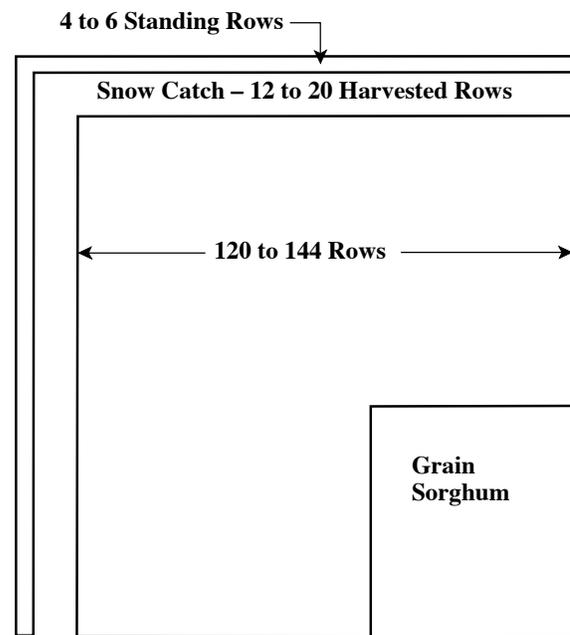


Figure 2.

Select sunny sites with well drained soils of moderate fertility. Plow and disk these sites to prepare a seedbed. Apply a minimum of 80 pounds of 5-10-10 or 10-20-20 fertilizer to each $\frac{1}{4}$ -acre food patch. Soil testing is recommended. Add lime if the pH is too low to produce satisfactory yields.

Food plots consisting of mixtures of grains can be broadcast and then very lightly disked and/or cultipacked to cover the seed. Pure corn food plots do best if drilled in rows. Pure sorghum food plots can be broadcast or drilled; however, the broadcast method requires a higher seeding rate and a light disking to cover the seed. Don't use herbicides or excessive cultivation on food plots. Annual weeds such as foxtail, common ragweed, lamb's-quarters, and barnyard grass will produce additional seed and cover in the wildlife food plot.

The annual grains seeded in a food plot may vary slightly depending upon specific management goals. See Table 1.

Some food plots can remain undisturbed for two winters if enough grain and weed seeds are available to provide a good food supply for wildlife into the second winter. Establish enough food plots to allow alternate planting between plots each year.

Help is available to farmers wishing to plant food plots for wildlife. Each year the Division of Wildlife provides free food plot seed packets to rural landowners. Each seven-pound packet contains dwarf sunflower, buckwheat, millet, and sorghum, and will seed up to a $\frac{1}{4}$ acre. Applications are available from the local state wildlife officer and all wildlife district

Table 1. Wildlife food plot seeding recommendations.

Grain	Seeding		Wildlife	
	Technique	Rate/Acre	Used by	Availability
Individual Seeding				
Corn	Drill 3-ft rows	3-4 lb	Pheasants, quail, doves, turkey, grouse, songbirds, rabbits, deer, squirrels	Fall & winter
Grain sorghum (dwarf)	Drill 3-ft rows or broadcast	3-6 lb		
Buckwheat	Broadcast	25 lb	Waterfowl, pheasants, quail, doves, grouse, deer	Summer & fall (until first frost)
Japanese millet	Broadcast	20 lb	Waterfowl	Fall
Food plot mix 1 lb Proso millet 2 lb Buckwheat 2 lb Oil type sunflowers 2 lb Dwarf grain sorghum	Broadcast	7 lb	Songbirds, pheasants, quail, doves	Fall

offices. Qualifying landowners may receive cost sharing for establishing food and cover for wildlife under the Conservation Reserve Program administered by the Farm Service Agency (FSA). Check with the county FSA office for details.

Private organizations, including local conservation clubs such as Quail Unlimited and Pheasants Forever, may provide seed, equipment or labor for the establishment of wildlife food plots on private property. The addresses and telephone numbers for such organizations are available from any wildlife district office.

