



Cover Crops

PURPOSE:

Cover crops offer a number of benefits to producers including reduced erosion, increased organic matter in the soil, redistribution of soil nutrients, nitrogen fixation, weed suppression, livestock forage, reduced soil compaction, and moisture management. One overlooked benefit of cover crops is their value to wildlife. Cover crops can create brood rearing habitat for pheasants, quail, and turkeys in addition to the soils benefits listed above. Insects are the primary food source for upland game bird chicks during the first two months of life. Broadleaf plants used in cover crops readily attract insects. For brood rearing habitat, the cover crop should have a good mix of broadleaf plants, to provide overhead canopy for chicks and allow for easy movement of chicks under the canopy. Spring and summer planted cover crops can be perfect for creating brood rearing habitat. Besides brood rearing habitat, cover crops can provide nesting cover, shelter, and food sources for upland birds, deer, dove, and a host of nongame species. The options for cover crop mixes are practically endless with the variety of seeds commercially available. A diverse mix will provide different maturity dates, more benefits to soil health, better erosion control, attractiveness to wildlife and insects, differing growth rates, variety of plant heights, and allow for a better chance of the cover crop to succeed at addressing other resource concerns. It is important to select species that are adapted to the local hardiness zone, soil type, and annual rainfall. Remember to follow Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) cover crop termination guidelines to allow for insurability of the following cash crop.



SPECIFICATIONS:

Spring Cover Crops

Spring planted cover crops will provide the most benefit to upland birds by creating brood rearing habitat. If small grains are included in the spring cover crop mix, they may provide nesting cover as well. Spring cover crops should be planted early enough, usually by April 1st, so that they are well established by late May or early June. Spring cover crops should be left growing as late as possible, ideally July 1st, to maintain a longer window of brood rearing habitat. Some species to consider for spring cover crops include oats, rye, barley, turnips, radishes, sweet clovers, white clover, crimson clover, subterranean clover, red clover, alfalfa, buckwheat, sunflower, cow peas, mustard, canola, safflower, lentils, flax, rapeseed, chickling vetch, common vetch, and hairy vetch. Spring planted cover crops will have to be terminated chemically. Leave the residue untilled to extend the benefits of the cover crop until the next crop is planted.

Summer Cover Crops

Summer cover crops planted after wheat or small grain harvest may also provide benefits to upland birds by providing mid to late summer brood habitat. For summer cover crops, species like sun hemp, sunflower, cow peas, sorghum, white clover, buckwheat, safflower, soybean, pearl millet, foxtail millet, and proso millet will provide habitat for pheasants and other wildlife. Most summer planted cover crops will self-terminate after the first killing frost in the fall. Leaving the residue untilled will provide food and cover for wildlife through the winter months.

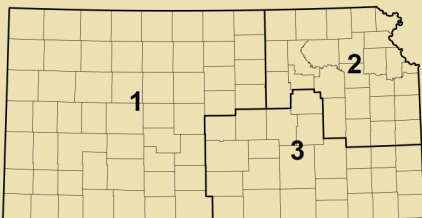
Fall Cover Crops

Fall planted cover crops can be used to provide fall and winter food sources for deer and other wildlife. However, fall planted cover crops that include small grains left growing into early summer may provide nesting cover in the spring. Fall mixes may include rapeseed, turnips, radishes, oats, wheat, rye, barley, vetch, clovers, alfalfa, and winter peas. Some fall planted cover crops will self-terminate during the winter; however, others will have to be chemically terminated the following spring or early summer.



Summer planted cover crop in Northeast Kansas. November photo.

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Region 1

1426 Hwy 183 Alt.
PO Box 338
Hays, KS 67601
(785) 628-8614

Region 2

300 SW Wanamaker
Topeka, KS 66606
(785) 273-6740

Region 3

6232 E. 29th St. N
Wichita, KS 67220
(316) 683-8069

