



Food/Cover Plots For Wildlife



Figure 1. Food/Cover plot, half planted to sorghum and half left fallow.

PURPOSE:

Food plots are used to provide a wide variety of foods for many different wildlife species. Typically food plots are planted to annual agricultural crops such as corn, wheat, sorghum, or millet. Food is seldom a limiting habitat component for upland birds in Kansas. By utilizing seed mixtures, a combination food/cover plot can be created to provide important food and cover plants. The result is an increased abundance and diversity of foods and cover available to a wide range of wildlife species. In addition, food/cover plots help to create important open brood rearing habitat and bare ground which, along with winter cover, are essential habitat components for many species of early successional habitat dependent species such as bobwhite quail, pheasant, and prairie chicken.

SPECIFICATIONS:

- Food plots come in two main types, grain plots designed to provide seed, and green browse food plots which offer succulent vegetation for wildlife forage. In some instances, the two can be combined. Food plots can also be created by leaving un-harvested strips such as sorghum, corn, or wheat along edges of crop fields.
- Grain food/cover plots should be planted early enough to allow adequate time for the crop to produce mature seed. **Planting a mixture of grains, rather than a single species, will benefit a wider range of wildlife species.**
- In general, food/cover plots or un-harvested crop strips should be a minimum of 0.25 acres in size, at least 30 feet in width, and preferably located adjacent to or within 100 feet of shrubby escape cover and/or diverse herbaceous cover. Create long, linear plots to divide large fields or establish block plantings where strips are not possible. Establish plots on the contour of the field to help prevent soil erosion. Food/cover plots should not be placed in native prairies due to the limited availability of these habitats.
- In most cases weed control should be limited; as the seeds provided by broadleaf flowering plants, such as sunflower and ragweed, are extremely important. Insects are attracted to these broadleaf flowering plants, which are an essential food source for quail and pheasant chicks and also the adults. Small plots are often exhausted by wildlife early in the winter, so consider increasing the plot size to one to two acres to provide longer-term benefits.
- A beneficial technique for upland birds and other wildlife is to establish a crop/fallow rotation whereby half of a plot is planted to an annual crop and the other half is left fallow that year. The following year plant the fallow area and do not disturb the stubble from the previous year's planting. A crop/fallow rotation allows native annual broadleaf plants such as sunflowers and ragweeds to establish (*Figure 1*). Not only do these annual broadleaf plants provide seed, but they also provide critical brood rearing habitat by attracting soft bodied insects which are an important food resource during spring and summer. In addition, these annual plants provide important overhead protection from aerial predators.

SPECIFICATIONS:

- A combination of grains should be used to maximize food diversity and plant structure. A mixture of grain sorghums, forage sorghums, and millets has been used successfully for many years in Kansas (*Figure 2*). In addition to seed production, the varying heights of these varieties are advantageous due to their lodging nature. As the taller sorghums lodge over on one another, they create additional cover from harsh winter weather conditions common to Kansas (*Figure 3*).

MAINTENANCE:

- Leaving one-third to one-half of a plot fallow each year encourages annual broad leaf forbs which provide seed and attract insects. Both foods are used extensively by both adult and young upland birds. Rotate the sequence the following year.
- Use proper fertilization as needed and protect from livestock grazing.
- Maintain shrubby cover and native grasses adjacent to food/cover plots.



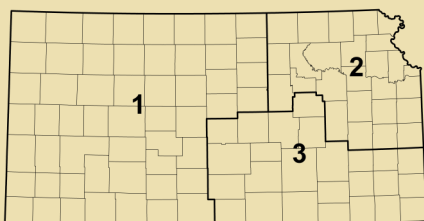
Figure 2.



Figure 3.



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