

# Food Plots for Wildlife

## Iowa Job Sheet



Natural Resources Conservation Service  
Des Moines, Iowa

January 2008



### Helping Wildlife

Food plots can benefit many types of wildlife. They serve as supplemental or emergency food supplies during extreme cold or snow in winter months, or may help wildlife get ready for winter. You can attract the wildlife you want to see on your land by choosing the food cover they favor as their habitat.

### Where food plots apply?

Food plots work well in or near protected grassland or woodland areas that offer good shelter and water but are lacking an adequate supply of food. In particular, food plots are a good idea on CRP land. Note, food plots are not allowed on some CRP land. Check with your local Farm Service Agency (FSA) office to see if your CRP is eligible for food plots.

### Where to get help

This job sheet does not cover all food plot possibilities. Land varies in its capability to support wildlife; changes in habitat will affect species other than those that may be emphasized in any food plot plan.

For help in establishing food plots and other habitat for wildlife, contact your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office. You may also visit the NRCS website at [www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.ia.nrcs.usda.gov) for more job sheets and conservation information.



Helping People Help the Land  
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## Changing Food Preferences

It is important to ensure there is adequate food for wildlife throughout the year. Well-designed food plots can provide year-round, high-quality wildlife foods by including a variety of plant species.

For instance green growing plants are the choice for many wildlife species in the spring. But their preference changes to fruits and seeds in the fall and winter.

## Location, erosion control

The location and spacing are critical elements of a food plot and should be carefully thought out.

Food plots should be located on the least erosive areas of each field. Soil loss must be within tolerable limits (T). Contour planting and minimal tillage are recommended.

## Grain Plots

Grain food plots should be located next to winter cover on the upwind side, to reduce snow drifting into critical winter cover. In all cases, locate food plots within 660 feet of winter cover.

Minimum size of a grain food plot is one-quarter acre. Plots should be at least 30 feet wide. As rule, one grain food plot for every 40 acres of farmland is recommended as a minimum. Some programs may cap acres of food plots, check with the local USDA office to confirm allowed food plot sizes.

Each year one-half of the grain food plot should be allowed to grow annual plants or be over seeded with a legume, while the other half is planted to grains.

Adequate vegetative cover must be developed and maintained to provide both wildlife and erosion control benefits. Protect the plot from livestock.

The food plot may be fertilized, but not at crop production rates. Use only enough N-P-K to meet the minimum plant requirements of the grains planted. Only 40 to 60 pounds of N will meet the needs of corn. Other grains will need less nitrogen. No P or K are needed if soil test are in optimal ranges. NOTE: You will want to limit the amount N used to protect water quality.

Weed control is not recommended; weeds such as foxtail and ragweed have many seeds with high protein value.

## Grain Plants Seeding Rates

Mixed grain plantings are recommended, but if only one grain is planted, grain sorghum (milo) will give the best results. Sorghum seeds are rich in energy, persistent on the plant, and usually available to wildlife when snow or ice covers other seeds. Other options and recommended seeding rates are:

Single Species Seeding Rates	
Grain	Broadcast Pounds per Acre*
Grain Sorghum	12
Corn	15
Sunflowers	12
Oats	50
Wheat	50
Buckwheat	40
Millet	20
Soybeans	50

*\* Cut this rate by 50% if row planted or drilled.*

Grain Mixture Seeding Rates	
Mixture	Broadcast Pounds per Acre
Grain Sorghum/ Soybeans	8
Grain Sorghum/ Soybeans/ German Millet	8
Grain Sorghum/ Sunflowers	12
Grain Sorghum/ Corn	8

*Caution: Planting too much seed will make plants compete and reduce the amount of grain produced.*

## Green Browse Food Plots

Green browse food plots should be at least one acre, on an open, tillable site next to suitable cover. Place the plot at least 50 feet from any woodland edge to reduce competition from trees and allow sunlight to reach the planting. It's a good idea to establish a buffer strip of grasses, perennial weeds and/or fruiting woody shrubs between the browse plot and any nearby timber.

A mixed planting of forbs, legumes and grasses will produce a greater abundance of insects, which are critical during the brood rearing time. Insects provide a protein rich diet to fast growing young as well as helping migratory species like wrens and bobolinks recover from their long trip. The addition of shrubs, especially those that fruit during summer months, add another food component for birds and browse for other wildlife. This increases diversity of wildlife, especially songbirds that will use the area.

An example green browse planting would be seeding 30 pounds per acre wheat and 2 pounds per acre of orchards grass in fall (September through early October). At the same time overseed one-half the plot with 2 pounds per acre of ladino clover and 2 pounds per acre of red clover. The following spring (January through March 30) overseed the other half with 10 pounds per acre of lespedeza (Korean, Kobe, Marion, Summit or a mix of these).

An alternative seed mix is 30 pounds per acre winter wheat, 5 pounds per acre alfalfa, and 2 pounds per acre red clover. Green browse plots should be mowed annually between July 15 and August 1 to maintain palatability of browse. Renovate and re-establish plots every 3 to 4 years.

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