

Wildlife Food Plots

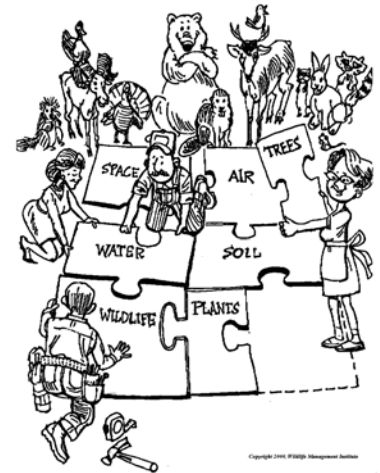
in Northern Minnesota

What are Food Plots?

- Food plots are small areas planted to annual or perennial agricultural crops to provide a supplemental food source for wildlife.

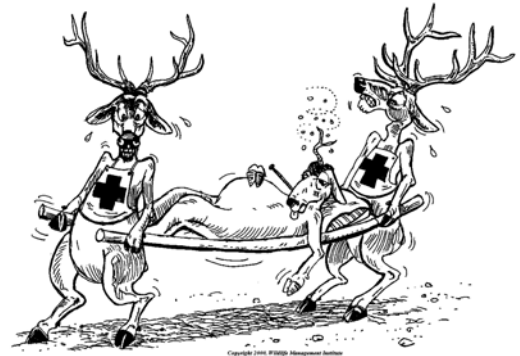
The Big Picture

- Food plots can be a component of wildlife management, but are not a replacement for quality, natural habitat that provides suitable cover, food, water and space.
- Food plots are not necessary for wildlife populations to survive. Wildlife are adapted to survive on natural foods.
- Take time to learn about wildlife habitat requirements and develop a management plan for your land. You have a wonderful opportunity to be a good land steward!
- Assess the wildlife and habitat on your land and surrounding land. Is the wildlife species of interest already plentiful? Are openings such as hay fields already present? Do limiting habitat factors exist where your time and effort are better spent?
- Protect wetlands. They provide critical habitat for native plants and wildlife. Temporary or wooded wetlands are vital for wildlife such as waterfowl, reptiles and amphibians.
- Wildlife belong to the public and should remain wild.



Food Plot Placement and Establishment

- Locate food plots away from roads to reduce the risk of wildlife/vehicle collisions!
- Permission is required to place food plots on public or private land, including forest industry land. If permission is not obtained, it is trespass.
- Resist the urge to convert natural habitat to food plots. Instead, utilize existing openings, such as old fields and timber harvest landings.
- Keep food plot size to a minimum. Two to four acres total within a 40-acre area is sufficient. Several, smaller plots are better than one large plot. Irregular edges and shapes are best.
- Plant food plots near cover on moderately to well-drained sites with a north-south orientation to maximize sunlight.
- Tests for soil pH and nutrients and appropriate addition of lime and fertilizer maximize plant growth, but are not necessary.
- Seed mixes do not need to be expensive. Single species can be purchased at local seed stores and mixed, are more likely to be adapted to your local climate and less expensive than big brand names.
- Examples of perennials for food plots include medium red clover, white dutch clover, alsike clover, perennial rye, Kentucky bluegrass, and creeping red fescue. Clovers need re-seeding every 3-5 years and annual mowing. Overall, perennials require less effort than annuals.
- Examples of annuals for food plots include oats, wheat, rye, buckwheat, corn, sunflowers, and soybeans.
- Food plots do not need to be treated as weed-free, manicured, farm fields. A variety of plants in them, including “weeds”, provides a diversity of food and greater plant structure.



- Herbicides are not necessary. They can kill forbs, such as asters, that are eaten by wildlife.
- Contact your local Extension Service for technical advice on plant species adapted to your area, soil fertility and seeding rates (www.extension.umn.edu/offices).

Food Plot Side Effects

- The labor, fuel, time and expense of food plot establishment and maintenance can be costly.
- Invasive plants, such as common tansy and spotted knapweed, can be introduced and spread, and then must be controlled.
- Forest landscapes become more fragmented. Utilize already disturbed sites such as timber harvest landings, trails and old fields, rather than creating food plots in natural habitat.
- Habitat for edge species that are already plentiful, such as robins, is increased and habitat for forest interior species, such as pine warblers, is decreased.

Why Do You Want A Food Plot? Are There Alternatives?

- To provide food and cover for wildlife? Remember, wildlife are adapted to naturally occurring food and cover. Your energy is better spent improving natural habitat.
- To view wildlife or aid hunting? Consider utilizing existing openings, such as backyards, trails, old fields and hayfields, or cutting small, viewing lanes.
- To increase the chance of seeing mature deer with large racks? Consider harvesting more antlerless deer and allowing bucks to mature. Research has not proven that food plots appreciably increase antler growth.
- To enjoy the land? Consider harnessing your energy and enthusiasm to improve wildlife habitat by creating and maintaining a more natural wildlife opening, improving winter cover and browse for deer, improving woodcock habitat, restoring a wetland, or creating small brush piles.



Wildlife Openings – An Easy, More Natural Alternative

- Wildlife openings are small areas cleared in the forest to mimic openings that naturally occur from disturbances such as wind and fire. They create less disturbance to the soil and native plants, require less labor and expense, provide less opportunity for invasive plants to become introduced, and have greater plant diversity and structure.
- Wildlife openings can be cleared and maintained by hand cutting, mowing, shearing, light disking, burning or selective treatment with herbicide to periodically remove shrubs and trees, to allow sunlight to native grasses and forbs and stimulate new growth of native shrubs.
- Fruit and mast shrubs and trees, such as chokecherry, raspberry, wild plums, crabapples, june berries, pin cherries, hazel and oaks, can be reserved or planted. If planted, they may need protection from browsing to become established.
- Ruffed grouse, bear, deer, moose, songbirds and other wildlife will use these openings. If near young deciduous forest and dense brush such as alder, they can provide singing grounds, feeding and roosting cover, and nesting and brood rearing habitat for woodcock.

* Prepared by MDNR Division of Fish and Wildlife.
Cartoons are courtesy of the Wildlife Management Institute.

