News Article
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Avoiding Food Plot Failure

This is the time of year when countless hunters take to field, not with a gun but with a tractor. Planting food plots is an annual tradition for many landowners and hunting clubs. In fact if you looked at an aerial photograph of Coosa County, you would see these openings scattered all across the country side. Food plots are actually a pretty major farming enterprise in the eyes of feed and seed store owners. Some have stated that they do more business in the fall than during the spring garden and cropping season. The money spent on wildlife food plots adds significantly to the economy in terms of equipment sales, seed, fertilizer and even bulldozer time creating these plots. So with so much invested, it is a good idea to take a look at possible causes of "food plot failure".

First we must realize what a food plot can and cannot do. The term "carrying capacity" is a way of expressing how many deer a given area of land can support. It is important to understand that food plots do not raise the carrying capacity of the land; it simply tends to attract deer and provide some additional nutrition. Of course hunters hope it will also increase their odds of seeing a good buck or doe for harvest. The following are a few potential problems that I have seen over the years.

Problem #1. Failure to soil test. Coosa County has a lot of different soils depending on the location, from red clay hills to deep bottomland loam soil. We even have a few areas with sandy soils. A simple soil test can tell a landowner exactly what his or her soil needs to grow a particular crop. The Extension Office in Rockford has free sample boxes for collecting the soil and the actual test is done at the Auburn University Soils Laboratory. There is a fee of $8 per sample.

Problem #2. Failure to lime. Our county rests in what is known as the Piedmont Area of the state. These are some of the oldest most weathered soils in the southeast. As a result, our soils tend to be fairly acidic which affects the availability of certain plant nutrients. A pH of 7 is considered neutral and most agronomic plants tend to grow best at a pH of 6.5 -7.0. Unfortunately our soils often have a pH much lower than this and needs to be corrected with agricultural lime. In many situations the application of 2 or more tons per acre are needed to correct the soil acidity. This is not an easy task and so often goes undone. There are now several local vendors who can help with this service.

Problem#3. Failure to incorporate. As we mentioned above, lime is very important, but it takes time for lime to react with the soil and change the pH. Lime should be applied several months before planting, so for fall planted crops the lime should be applied in the spring and for spring summer plots the lime needs to go out in the fall. In short, apply lime whenever you can but the sooner the better. Also remember to incorporate or till in the lime to speed up the reaction and movement into the soil. Fertilizer should be applied at the time of planting and again incorporated.

Problem #4. Timing of Planting Failures. Another problem is planting too early or too late. If plots are planted too early (late August to early September) you run the risk of having your crop cleaned out by armyworms. Also early crops may germinate after the first light rain and then burn up in the heat and dry conditions that follow. Generally, mid September to mid October is the ideal time to plant cool season grains such as wheat, oats and rye. Now that's not to say you can't get away with an early planting if conditions get right, but it's a gamble. Adequate rainfall is also more likely with later plantings. A wheat crop planted during a dry spell often becomes turkey and dove food, with little left to germinate when rain finally comes. Planting too late also has problems. A frost heave can actually lift very young seedling

out to the ground and also planting late just does not give the plants enough growth to sustain grazing before the plants slow down in the colder months and shorter days that follow.

Problem #5. Soil Preparation and Planting Failures. Food plots should be mowed several weeks prior to planting, then disked and allowed to rest. This will help some of the vegetation to dry up and decay and make it easier to turn at planting time. New plots and occasionally established plots would benefit greatly by using a turning plow to break the soil a little deeper. At planting the plots should be disked enough to create a good clean seed bed but not pulverized into a powder. Wheat, oats and rye (and commercial blends) should not be planted too deeply, not more than 1-2 inches, but they do need to be covered. Clovers should be planted on or very near the surface on a firmed seedbed. A light drag is useful to help cover the seed and then cultipacking the soil will assure good seed to soil contact. Driving over the site with a 4-wheeler will do a pretty good job. In areas where deer grazing pressure is heavy, some will use ryegrass plots or add some to the grain crops mentioned above. Ryegrass can be planted on the surface and then cultipacked.

Food plots are a great way to improve the aesthetics and hunting opportunities on your property. By paying attention to some of the details mentioned above, a landowner can get more “bang” for his “buck”. For more information contact County Extension Coordinator, Roger Vines at the Coosa County Extension Office at 256-377-4713.