The term “partridge pea” has been used to describe a wide array of small wild peas consumed by bobwhite quail. Partridge pea, however, is usually used in reference to two species of Cassia that occur widely throughout the eastern United States.

Both species, showy partridge pea (Cassia fasciculata) and sensitive partridge pea (C. nictans), are native annual legumes that volunteer frequently in fields, waste places, and along roadsides in Alabama. Partridge pea produces hard-coated seeds that may persist for extended periods. The seeds are eaten by bobwhite quail and are often an important food item in their diet during late winter when other food sources have spoiled or been depleted. Partridge pea’s greatest benefit to quail comes from establishing stands where other native legumes are absent or scarce.

Description

Partridge pea germinates during late winter and grows rapidly through September. Its fern-like leaves grow on branched, reddish stems. Nectaries, or honey glands, are present on the stems near the bases of leaves.

Showy partridge pea may reach 6 feet in height at maturity, but typically grows to only 2 to 3 feet. Sensitive partridge pea rarely exceeds 1½ feet in height.

One to four brilliant yellow flowers are generally produced along the stem and yield long, narrow, seeded pods. Petals of showy partridge pea may extend 1 inch in length. Those of sensitive partridge pea seldom exceed ½ inch.

Pods ripen by late October, burst open, and scatter three to twelve small, black, flattened seeds. The seeds are extremely hard, waterproof, and resistant to weathering.

Site Preferences

Partridge pea tolerates a wide range of soil types, including many nutrient-deficient ones, but grows best on sandy-textured soils. Moist, slightly acidic (pH 6.0 to 6.5) sites favor rapid growth and seed production. Production is poor on both extremely acidic and highly alkaline sites.

Although plants receiving full sunlight prosper, partridge pea usually requires partial shade for optimum production. Highest seed production generally occurs where plants are under about 30 percent shade. Seed yields drop dramatically as shade exceeds 50 to 60 percent.

Establishment

Plot Size And Location. Establish partridge pea stands in areas where coverage of other native legumes is poor. Locate plots near good protective cover for quail. To minimize competition from grasses, establish plots on partially shaded sites and on land that has not been cultivated recently. Forest openings, utility right-of-ways, unused shaded sites and the edges of agricultural fields provide excellent sites for establishing partridge pea.
Plots of ⅛ to ¼ acre in size usually provide sufficient seed production for quail and should be maintained at approximately ¼-mile intervals.

**Soil Preparation.** Thoroughly plow selected sites to a depth of 6 to 9 inches before planting. Lime and fertilize plots according to soil test recommendations. If soil is not tested, apply about 300 pounds of 0-20-20 fertilizer per acre.

**Planting Dates.** Partridge pea may be planted any time from late winter through May. The best planting dates usually occur during March in Alabama.

**Planting Methods.** Seed may be planted in rows spaced 3 feet apart or broadcast over finely prepared seedbeds. Seeds should be sown at a rate of 10 to 15 pounds per acre and covered to a depth of ⅛ to ¼ inch.

When broadcast planting, cover seeds by disking lightly or cultipacking just enough to prevent drifting during heavy rainfall. In order for seeds to sprout, the hard seed coat must be scratched or scarified. Using scarified seed or higher planting rates usually provides better stands during the first year. Germination of unscarified seed may not occur completely until 1 to 2 years following initial establishment.

**Maintenance**

Partridge pea readily reseeds itself. Therefore, both planted and naturally occurring stands can be enhanced and maintained indefinitely.

Established stands of partridge pea need regular maintenance to maximize seed production. Periodic disking and burning stimulate production. Partridge pea stands should be disked lightly and/or burned with a relatively hot fire every 2 to 3 years. After such treatment, stands remain productive for 1 to 3 years. Production dwindles after that time without further maintenance.

Delay disking and burning as late as weather conditions permit, until immediately prior to germination of residual seeds. Initial germination typically occurs during February. Seed production may be enhanced and extended by applications of basic slag or other incomplete fertilizers every 3 to 5 years.

Lee Stribling, *Extension Wildlife Scientist*, Associate Professor, Zoology and Wildlife Science, Auburn University

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