Wildlife Food Plots

Wisconsin Job Sheet 136

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Wisconsin

INTRODUCTION

Wisconsin winters are hard on everyone. Some of the wildlife species that share our farms migrate to warmer climates for the winter, but many wildlife and song bird species must tolerate the frigid conditions. We can help these resident species survive our snowy winters by planting wildlife food plots. Food plots are annual or perennial plantings of grain, grass, forbs, or legumes to provide food for a variety of wildlife. They also add plant diversity and cover to the rural landscape and can serve as supplemental or emergency food supplies during extreme cold or snow. Without a reliable safe food source, even the best winter cover is useless to wildlife.

The most common grain used for food plots is corn, but many types of grain can be used, including sorghum, soybeans, millet, buckwheat, and sunflowers. Because a wide range of wildlife species can benefit from food plots, solid stands of a single food source are not allowed. A diversified planting will benefit a greater number of wildlife species during that period when existing food sources are scarce. Green growing plants are the choice for many wildlife species in the spring, for instance, but their preference changes to fruits and seeds in the fall and winter. This job sheet does not cover all food plot possibilities.

WHERE TO PLANT

Food plots should be located on the least erodible areas of fields where soil erosion does not pose a problem. Establish food plots adjacent to or within ¼ mile of existing winter cover such as shrub swamps, cattail marshes, woodlots, wide shrubby fencerows, or dense warm season grass fields. Annual food plots should be located south and east sides of permanent cover to reduce snow drifting into the plots. If adjacent cover is not available, snow drifting into food plots can be lessened by establishing snow traps. In a crop field, this can be accomplished by harvesting 12-20 rows just inside of the outer 4-6 rows on the windward side.

SIZE

Individual food plots are recommended to be a minimum of ¼ acre in size, but 1-2 acre plots are preferred. Plots larger than one acre are particularly necessary in areas of high deer/turkey densities to ensure adequate food persists for other target species throughout the winter.

SHAPE

Block-shaped food patches are recommended over long linear patches because narrow patches fill with drifting snow, burying the grain. Consider a minimum width of 50 feet to help prevent snow drift issues.

OTHER REQUIREMENTS

No grain or crop residue is allowed to be removed from the field and the food plots must be protected from livestock grazing. With consistent use by wildlife, food plots will need to be planted annually. If food plots are relocated or discontinued, the site must be re-seeded to an approved cover.

CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM FOOD PLOT REQUIREMENTS

Producers awarded 5 points in N1b must be aware that, if accepted in CRP, food plots must be planted each year of the contract. Food plots must be identified on a site map and may not be moved without permission.

There is no CRP cost sharing for food plots.

CRP food plots are limited in size to 10% of the acres of a field not to exceed a maximum of five acres in any field, regardless of field size. Example: a 60-acre field is limited to no more than five acres of food plot.

NOTE: To provide more diversity, corn cannot exceed 50%, and forages cannot exceed 25% of any single CRP food plot.

If more than one food plot exists on a field, each individual site will be considered a separate food plot.

PLANTING INFORMATION

Where appropriate, food plots should be planted on the contour and conservation tillage shall be used.

Apply the necessary fertilizer, according to soil test, to ensure establishment of the plot. In lieu of a soil test, apply 100-150 lb/acre. of starter fertilizer (9-24-24 or 15-30-30).

Planting dates: May 1 – June 15. Sorghum requires warm soil for successful establishment; therefore, food plots containing sorghum should be planted in June.

Weed control may be necessary to reduce competition and ensure successful establishment. The presence of some weeds such as foxtail, smartweed, and ragweed actually benefit wildlife by providing higher protein and a greater number of seeds than domestic grain. Use approved chemicals according to label recommendations and/or use mechanical cultivation, as necessary. Rotating mixtures within the food plot is encouraged to provide diversity and assist in pest/weed control. Approved seeding rates are located in Table 1.

Multiply the seed rate by the percent of the food plot to determine pounds of seed needed.

Remember, successful food plots require inputs, management, and attention to detail comparable to farming for crop production.

PLANTINGS AND MIXES

Food plot managers may plant any of the following seed at these approved rates during any given year on their CRP food plot site.

Table 1

Food Type Annual	Seeding Rate (lbs./acre)
Alfalfa[1]	12
Buckwheat	40
Clover, red[1]	10
Clover, alsike[1]	3
Clover, ladino[1]	3
Corn[2]	15
Forage Sorghum	12
German/Pearl Millet	8
Grain Sorghum (Milo)	12
Oats	40
Partridge Pea	10
Soybeans	45
Sunflowers	8
Wheat	50

[1] May not exceed 25% of any food plot.
[2] May not exceed 50% of any food plot. Corn planted by population will vary in weight. Planting population should not exceed 28,000 kernels per acre and 18,000 when interseeded with soybeans.

Seeding rates may be adjusted to reflect planter settings if approved by a certified planner.

Planning changes other than minor adjustments to the above seeding rates require prior approval from NRCS.

Seeding rates may be increased by 25% if broadcast seeding.

Forage sorghum: Planting outside rows on north and west sides of plot to forage sorghum as a snow catch is highly recommended. Plugging every other hole on the grain drill to get 12 to 14-inch spacing is recommended. Broadcasting the seed is another good option.

Grain sorghum provides food nearer to ground, which can cause problems in heavy snow conditions. Using short maturity sorghum varieties may ensure better grain production.

Grain and forage sorghum selected for food plots should be early maturing and stiff stalked varieties.

Millets and buckwheat can be broadcast then dragged. Millets and buckwheat should be planted inside the outer rows of forage sorghum or corn when possible to provide better cover and snow catch.

Sunflowers work best when planted with forage sorghum or corn. Broadcasting and dragging is an effective way to establish sunflowers

Soybeans may be planted in a food plot to add variety. Planting soybeans where snow is not drifting is also recommended. The soybeans can be planted using the corn planter with correct adjustments and running between the existing corn rows.

Corn cannot exceed 50% of the mixture. Corn varieties should mature in 95 days or less. It can be planted in the middle of the food plot and be surrounded by the remaining mixture.

Forages (clovers, alfalfa, winter wheat, etc.) cannot exceed 25% of the mixture.

A nurse crop of oats or spring rye can accompany the forage at a rate of one bushel/acre. Drilling is a good means to establish alfalfa and clover although broadcasting and dragging is also an option.

Food Plot Mix Examples

Example 1

25% Corn: 15 lbs/acre x 25% = 4 lbs/acre
25% Grain sorghum: 12 lbs/acre x 25% = 3 lbs/acre
25% Sunflowers: 8 lbs/acre x 25%= 2 lbs/acre
25% Buckwheat: 40 lbs/acre x 25% = 10 lbs/acre

Example 2

50% Corn: 18,000 seeds/acre
50% Soybeans: 45 lbs/acre x 50% = 23 lbs/acre

Corn and soybeans may be planted together with planter adjustments.

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

The seed mix examples above are the per-acre mixes. Multiply this by the food plot acres to obtain the amount of seed needed.

Custom Mixtures: Many conservation and wildlife organizations have seed mixes that provide an excellent winter food source. All custom mixes must be approved by an NRCS Biologist prior to planting.


Photo by Kristine Welch

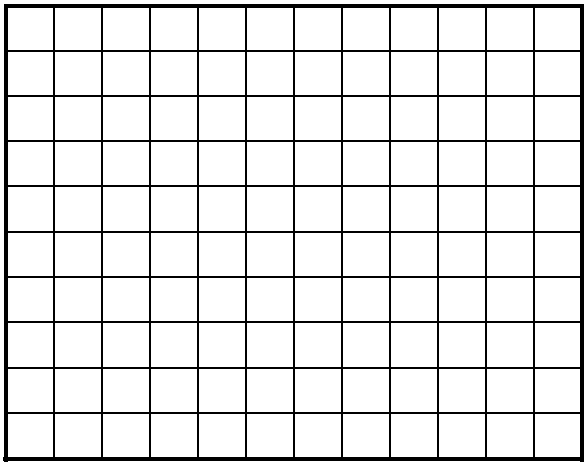
Wildlife Food Plot (CP12) Plan

Landowner: _____

Seed Quantity Calculations

	Plot Number _____ Acres _____		**Plot Number_____ Acres _____**	
Species	**Rate Per Acre**	**# Seed Needed**	**Rate Per Acre**	**# Seed Needed**
		0		**0**
		0		0
		0		0
		0		0
		0		0

Location Sketch



Scheduled planting date_____

Total acres to be planted_____

Additional Specifications and Notes