Food Plots - part 1

By David Falkenham, UNHCE Extension Educator, Forestry & Wildlife

As I write this article I realize that another hunting season is upon us. It seems strange that the County Forester would write about hunting season, but I work with dozens of landowners who want to know what they can do to encourage more game species, particularly deer, turkeys and bear onto their property. One of the best ways to do this is to create permanent maintained grassy openings, commonly called food plots. Food plots are an excellent way to encourage many species of wildlife, not just big game to use your property more frequently.

The first decision you must make when planning your food plot is where to place food plots on your property and how to do that. If you actively log your property, old log landings make great food plots. Another possibility is to combine food plot preparation with a timber sale on your land. Simply mix some small clear cuts into your timber sale and have some of that clear cut acreage converted to food plots. This will of course require the stumping and smoothing of the clear cuts which will cost some money. If you just had a timber sale, use some of the money from the timber sale to pay for the excavation. After the wind storm of spring 2007, most of my land in Lancaster had to be heavily clear cut to salvage the timber. To make lemonade out of apparent lemons we converted nearly three acres of clear-cut and log landing into food plots. The effort was hard and not cheap. For about $2,500 and a lot of sweat and sore backs we converted the acreage to productive openings that are frequented by an abundance of wildlife. For information on cost share programs that may help with this work contact your local Fish and Game headquarters or the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service office in Woodsville or contact your local UNH Cooperative Extension County Forester.

After the land is cleared it is always a good idea to have a soil test done to help you decide how much fertilizer you will need. Soil testing can be done through UNH Cooperative Extension in our Durham laboratory. You can learn more about this program on our web site at http://extension.unh.edu. Once the soil test is done it is time to decide what to plant. What you plant depends on two factors: 1.) what wildlife you would like to attract and 2.) how much annual work you want to put into your food plot. I consider a food plot to be an opening that gets mowed at least once during the growing season; thus I break food plots down into three categories: 1.) Maintained grassy openings. These are the lowest maintenance of the food plots and they are usually an acre or more in size. These plots will attract a high diversity of wildlife, but they are not species specific. Seeding these food plots is fairly cheap because you won't spend a lot of money on expensive clovers, in fact it is best to use inexpensive native seed such as winter rye, and let natural seeding fill in the rest. 2.) Clover plots. These are perennial openings that will be mowed at least twice, preferably three times per year, to keep them growing well. Mowing clover not only provides natural mulch for your plot, it also helps the clover spread and thrive, and keeps the clover fresh so it tastes better to deer. Most people who choose to make this effort are targeting a more specific population of deer, bear and turkeys not to mention rabbits and porcupine. 3.) Annual plots or hunting plots. These areas focus on deer; they are the most intensively managed plots because they require replanting every year, just like a garden. The most common seeds planted here are brassicas which are members of the turnip family. Other common species are kale, wheat, oats and rye. These plots really do attract deer however you should locate these plots in a convenient spot so they can be harrowed and re-planted every year. This of course also requires extra equipment, time and money.

Stay tuned next month for more information on building your food plot system. If you have questions about food plots on your property please contact me at UNH Cooperative Extension Grafton County at 787-6944 or dave.falkenham@unh.edu.