



## BUCKS to BUTTERFLIES

### Wildlife Benefits of Native Grasses and Forbs

#### Introduction

Native plants are those that have evolved over thousands of years to the geography, hydrology, and climate of a particular region. As a result, native plants form communities that provide habitat for a variety of wildlife, including pollinators, deer, songbirds, upland game birds, and beneficial insects.

Because they are adapted to local conditions, native plants provide a beautiful, hardy, drought resistant, low maintenance, often year-round landscape while benefiting the environment. Once established, they often save time and money by eliminating the need for fertilizers, pesticides, water, and requiring minimal maintenance.



**Native plants provide shelter and food for wildlife while also reducing air pollution.**

#### Going Native

Native grasses and forbs (herbaceous non-grasses) can be utilized in the agricultural landscape for multiple conservation benefits. Native plants can be planted as filter strips or field borders to reduce soil erosion and nutrient run-off. At the same time, they provide habitat and travel corridors for wildlife. Wildlife all along the food chain — from pollinating insects to upland game birds, songbirds and deer — can find food and shelter on and around crop or rangeland acreage when native vegetation is integrated into the agricultural operation.

To increase the abundance and diversity of wildlife across the landscape, a landowner's primary task is to increase the availability of food, water, and cover. Wildlife—particularly those species that are hunted—is usually more abundant where two or more vegetative covers merge causing an “edge” effect. Conversely, a lack of high quality edge may limit the abundance of wildlife found on a property. The establishment and maintenance of a variety of native plants on areas of low productivity produce this beneficial “edge” effect and increase the abundance of wildlife on a property. Low-lying areas, fence rows, field edges, woody patches, and hard-to-access acreage adjacent to working lands are ideal sites to develop as conservation areas.

Traditional wildlife plantings or food plots are usually a variation of a commercial crop or rangeland forage. However, landowners/managers should consider the cost of fuels, fertilizers, seeds, and time needed to establish traditional food plots that may only be utilized for a short period of the year, and may target only one or two species. Diverse stands of native vegetation can provide the same benefits as traditional food plots while providing year-round habitat for an array of species — cover in addition to food — and added environmental benefits such as water quality improvement. An important advantage of native vegetation is that once established all that is required to maintain it is periodic mowing, prescribed burning, or light disking to encourage new growth and control invasive woody species.

## **Attracting DEER**

It is safe to say that the majority of food plots are planted for the purpose maximizing deer harvesting opportunities. However, just disturbing an area by plowing or burning can make an area attractive to wildlife. When exposed to air, light and water, seeds that were lying dormant in the soil begin to germinate. These young, succulent native plants often have high nutrient value and attract a variety of wildlife, particularly white-tail deer and rabbits. Periodic disturbance of the soil by light disking can create a natural food plot for wildlife. Stands of native vegetation can be made even more attractive by a light application of fertilizer. Remember, it does not have to look like a perfect, manicured stand to attract and hold wildlife. In fact, mixed native plants of various heights help conceal deer giving them more confidence to browse in these areas.



## **Attracting GAME BIRDS**

A primary reasons for declining populations of grassland birds such as bobwhites, meadowlarks, and dickcissels is the lack of quality native grassland habitat. Native grasslands contain a diversity of species that produce year-round cover and food in the form of seeds and insects. The structure of native bunch grasses facilitates efficient foraging by grassland birds, particularly bobshites. The use of sod-forming, introduced grasses (such as Bahia and Bermuda) contributes to the decline of grassland bird populations by limiting growth of desirable cover and food-producing plants, and inhibiting bird movement and efficient foraging. A seed mix of little bluestem, big bluestem, Indiangrass, Illinois bundleflower, partridge pea, plains coreopsis, and black-eyed Susan may be planted. Such native grasses can enhance grassland bird habitat when planted adjacent to cropland or pastureland, when established and properly grazed in rangeland, or when included in prairie restoration efforts.



## **Attracting POLLINATORS**

The best way to attract and support healthy pollinator populations is to ensure a rich, diverse plant community. Areas for pollinators should incorporate a succession of flowers in order to provide blooms throughout the growing season. A mix of species such as goat's rue, butterfly milkweed, blackeyed-Susan, compass plant, fragrant goldenrod, Illinois bundleflower, partridge pea, ironweed, slender mountain mint, and switchgrass can provide such a succession of blooms. The stand should have several different species in bloom at any one time containing both annuals and perennials, and should be pesticide free.

