

Herbaceous Openings for Wildlife

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Managed and maintained herbaceous openings are a valuable source of both forage and habitat that benefits a wide variety of wildlife and oftentimes can compliment forest management activities. Creating and seeding these openings can be strictly for the benefit of wildlife or can be accomplished to address potential erosion issues; seeding log landings, winter roads, water bars, water diversion ditches, stream crossings, and other disturbed sites when closing out a timber harvest.

Before planting, determine your goals; do you want to seed strictly for erosion control which will require little or no future management, or in the case of larger openings and fields, do you want low maintenance plants that will last several years or do you want to replant annually. Another factor to consider is wildlife values; you can plant a seed mix that will benefit a wide variety of species or as with food plots for example, planting specifically to benefit a particular species.

For erosion control measures, deertongue and the fescue varieties are a good choice and are included in most roadside mixes commonly available. They are well rooted, are aggressive growing, and form a dense cover. They are of little value to wildlife, however by adding a variety of clovers, an annual or winter rye, or birdsfoot trefoil for example the mix can then provide some benefit to wildlife in addition to their main function of erosion control.

Wildlife will benefit greatly from legumes and ryegrass varieties. Legumes can be classified as a 'warm season' legume that do the majority of growing during the heat of the summer months, or 'cool season' legumes which grow most during the spring and fall. They are also annual or perennial depending on the variety. Clover varieties are primarily 'cool season' varieties and include white, red, and ladino types. These are only a few examples of the many plants that are available in various conservation mixes. Other varieties to keep in mind include; Kentucky bluegrass, orchardgrass, and timothy.

Species of wildlife that can benefit from herbaceous openings run the gamete from insects to our largest mammals. For example, deer and bear utilize both grasses and clovers for food, smaller mammals and songbirds benefit from both food and nesting cover. Upland gamebirds including turkeys, grouse, and woodcock use the openings or nearby edge habitat for nesting, brood rearing, and feeding. In addition, woodcock also use these openings for nighttime roosting and courtship displays. Herbaceous openings and fields adjacent to deer wintering areas are of particular importance in the early spring when deer are in search of higher protein food sources.

Included below are several seed mixes recommended by MDIFW for a variety of situations. These seed mixes can certainly be augmented to meet the specific needs of the landowner:

Recommended Herbaceous Seeding Mixes

Mix #1: This is the preferred mix for most situations since it will produce a good sod which is resistant to invasion by woody vegetation on a variety of soils under various light conditions. These grasses will provide green forage in early spring and late fall.

Quantities are pounds per acre: Asterisks are legumes which should be inoculated:

Orchard grass	6
Kentucky bluegrass	6
Tall Fescue	6
Ladino clover *	1
Birdsfoot trefoil *	10
Annual or winter rye	10

Mix #2: This is the erosion control mix supplemented to improve its wildlife value. Caution! This mix contains creeping red fescue, which has minimal wildlife value and can dominate other grasses in sunny locations. It will provide good results in most situations; is easy to obtain and can be kept on hand for quick spot applications.

Conservation mix or Roadside mix from Agway 40-60

Ladino clover *	1
Birdsfoot trefoil *	10
Annual or winter rye	10

Mix #3: This is recommended for sites where no fertilizer can or will be used.

Deertongue	10
Birdsfoot trefoil *	10

Mix #4: Use this mix in shady areas only as this combination will dominate other grasses in sunny locations.

Creeping red fescue	20
Birdsfoot trefoil *	10

Mix #5: This mix can be used in rough areas such as hummocks stump piles or rocky or erosion prone sites on the edges of log landings seeded to other species, but use it sparingly. Five pounds on the edge of a one acre clearing is sufficient. Use equal amounts of the following species:

Crownvetch *

Flatpea *

Openings can be the reclaiming of a field that is growing back to early successional habitat, or are forest openings within managed woodlots. These forest openings can be created from one (+) acre patch cuts, log landings, or old wood and haul roads. Seeded roads can continue to be used for both timber management and recreation. Size of openings is important as they must be large enough to allow adequate sunlight to reach the ground to stimulate plant growth. If the openings are more linear in shape, they should be 50-100 feet wide and created in a north-south direction to allow the most opportunity for sunlight. Several openings are more beneficial and should be distributed throughout the woodlot if the opportunity presents itself. This provides greater access for wildlife and management flexibility for the landowner.

Site preparation is an important factor that will help determine the success of your seeding effort. Initially, newly created sites should be cleared of rocks, stumps, and other debris. Soil tests are also beneficial especially if managing for larger openings or fields, and of less importance for example when just seeding areas to address erosion control concerns. For these larger openings, liming and fertilizing should be considered and spread at recommended rates. This can be accomplished by frost seeding late winter/early spring or worked into the soil with a disk or drag preferably before seeding. Depending on soil conditions, additional liming may need to be done every 5-7 years, and additional fertilizing can be done 2-3 years after planting and then every 5-10 years.

Maintaining these sites over time can best be accomplished by mowing. This can be accomplished annually or perhaps every 3-5 years to keep woody vegetation down. Mowing will also encourage succulent new growth and increase insect production which is an important source of protein for both songbirds and gamebirds, particularly young of the year. MDIFW recommends mowing after mid to late July which will allow for ground nesting birds to complete their nesting cycle. It will also allow for new growth to be available to wildlife right up until it is covered by deep snows. If there are several open areas to maintain, varying mowing schedules is another option to create different successional stages and provide for greater habitat diversity that will also benefit wildlife.