

Raising Green Without Spending Green

By P.J. Perea

Courtesy of the National Wild Turkey Federation

With petroleum costs continuing to rise, landowners are feeling the pinch in the form of more expensive fertilizer, diesel fuel and everything in between related to managing wildlife. However, this doesn't mean that you have to do less for wildlife; in fact, with proper planning and the right techniques, one can still create attractive food plots and wildlife habitat without breaking the bank.

Scott Vance, Johnny McRight are two wildlife and agriculture experts. They recently shared their tips with us on how you can better manage your property for wildlife without emptying your wallet.

Green Manure

Scott Vance, NWTF director of conservation field operations, suggested, "Go green – green manure that is."

Green manure is the term for a variety of cover crops that are grown specifically to add nitrogen to the soil.

They are planted the fall before planting spring food plots and crop fields, and then plowed into the soil, while still green, to compost into fertilizer.

Green manure crops will:

- Provide free nitrogen
- Reduce fertilizer costs
- Reduce fuel costs via no-till planting

"Some green manure crops can add more than 30 pounds of nitrogen per acre to the soil in just six to seven weeks," Vance said. "This is like getting 30 pounds of nitrogen fertilizer per acre for practically nothing and still benefiting wildlife with the first crop!"

Manure crops make their own nitrogen using specialized root systems and bacteria. The majority of plants with this ability are in the legume family. Some of the nitrogen produced by legumes are stored in the plant foliage. When this foliage is returned to the soil via disking or tillage, it is almost as good as commercial fertilizer.

What's Right for Green Manure?

To be efficient, the green manure should meet the following criteria:

- Adds nitrogen to the soil — legumes (Leguminosae family) are the best plants for this;
- Fast growing;
- Suited to the local growing conditions — the climate, soil and water available;
- Seed is inexpensive and easy to get;
- Doesn't require extra irrigation, fertilizer or pesticides;
- Resistant to insects and diseases;
- Has multiple uses (adds nitrogen, useful as forage and cover for wildlife).

Legumes, such as vetch, clover, lupine and peas, are the best green-manure crops. This is because legumes can absorb nitrogen from the air and release it into the soil, making it available for the next crop. They also can store nitrogen in their foliage, more so than many commonly planted legumes such as beans. In the Southeast, the favorite green manure crop is crimson clover, because it is easy to establish, economical and a great forage for wildlife.

Upland Areas

Green manure is especially useful for improving poor upland soil, which is often acidic or easily eroded. Crimson clover or common vetch are easily grown on most upland soils and provide excellent green manure benefits.

How to Go Green

1. Plant the green manure during the fall;
2. Let it grow until it is time to prepare the land for the spring planting;
3. Plow the green manure crop into the soil several weeks before sowing the spring seeds — this will allow time for decomposition and release of nutrients;

If you do this regularly, you will get free nitrogen for your crop, and save money on fertilizer.

Once you have chosen a green manure crop you should be able to grow it with the least possible labor and cost. Here's another point to remember: use zero tillage. That is, do not plow or till the field before planting. This saves time, labor and fuel. However, if your soil lacks phosphorus, you may have to add some before planting. Don't worry about adding nitrogen. The legumes have taken care of the need for nitrogen.

When the field is ready, just broadcast the seed. Use enough seed for a dense, close planting. This will help the green manure build up nitrogen quickly. If the field is thinly planted, the crop will have to grow for a longer period to add enough nitrogen to help the next crop.

Do not use any pesticides on the green manure crop, as this adds to its cost. Choose a plant variety with high insect resistance and suitable for your growing area. To find out what plants are best for your region, consult with your local NRCS office.

Nurse Crops

DeltAg President Johnny McRight's approach is slightly different, but nets the same results. McRight's company (www.deltagwildlife.com) creates seed and plant treatments for wildlife food plots.

"With fertilizer costing \$1,000 per ton, I don't buy nitrogen," McRight said. "On my place, I plant two things in my summer plots: lablab and beans (both legumes)." McRight lets both these plants grow up to about five or six leaves per plant. "That's when they are making their own nitrogen," he explained. "Then I plant my grains such as sorghum, corn and other grass grains."

Fall Plots

For fall plots, McRight suggested planting BioLogic Trophy Oats (www.mossyoakbiologic.com) with about 1- to 1.5-pounds of BioLogic Clover Plus added to each bag of oat seed.

The clover and oats come up together with the clover providing the nitrogen to boost the oat crop. When the clover is good and healthy and the oats have mature seeds, McRight clips the oats with a bushhog, which re-seeds the plot for another crop of oats.

The clover crop feeds turkeys during the winter and spring and attracts the bugs for poults in the summer. Deer also use the clover plots in the summer when they need the protein and nutrients to grow antlers and feed fawns. McRight strongly recommends a soil test before any planting takes place and the soil is properly limed.

Saving Some Bucks

Landowners don't necessarily have to do less for wildlife when it comes to increasing costs. By using crops that complement each other such as green manure and nurse crops and by improving their management practices using low- to no-cost techniques such as food plot improvements and prescribed burning, landowners can still grow the green for wildlife without spending the green from their wallets.

For more habitat tips for wildlife, visit www.nwtf.org or www.deltagwildlife.com.