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## **Wildlife food plots: A tempest in a teapot?**

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Planting agricultural crops for wildlife is a practice that has been around since the 1930s, but today with all the interest in the environment, a business is being built around the practice. Just look on the internet at the seed companies that cater to plantings for wildlife. Here in Florida, I was surprised to learn through one of our local seedsmen that half of the *aeschynomene* seed that is harvested is currently sold for wildlife plantings. This would have been unimaginable when I began my work at the Range Cattle REC 30 years ago, but I would have been very interested in the fact since my Master of Science research at Penn State, funded in part by the Pennsylvania Game Commission, involved wildlife food plots. I determined the time, amount, and nutritive value of forages eaten by deer in clearings within hard-wood forests on the Appalachian Plateau. I met some resistance in my pursuit of applying agronomy to wildlife management in 1970, and I was told this would decrease my competitiveness for jobs compared to my peers who took on conventional research projects. Graduate students present a seminar before the faculty upon completion of their work, and I remember mine because one old professor commented at the end, 'It seems to me that this is just a tempest in a teapot!', which was a delightful phrase for a fuss about nothing much.

Well, I published the findings in *Agronomy Journal* (Volume 69, pp 497-501), and it probably stands as the only article to date on wildlife to appear in this respected journal. The results may not be applicable to Florida, but the need for application is so ingrained in me I can not resist. In short, I found significant forage utilization in April and early May when cool-season grasses were just beginning growth and natural, herbaceous foods were relatively scarce. Consumption amounted to just 8% of total annual production, but this forage contained 25% crude protein and was high in digestible energy. Since fawning occurred in late May-early June, these forages would appear make a contribution to the herd. The implication for land managers was that they needed to only strive for a little

forage at the right time. Isn't this the same message I have been preaching over the years? Select and manage your forages to meet specific needs of your cattle?

Over my years at Ona I have written 39 articles for the Florida Cattlemen, all of which were narrowly focused on specific aspects of managing pasture or range for cattle. Now, with this last article, it is doubly strange for me to both break with that tradition and to also refer my very first research project, which was an environmental topic. The list of forage research needs of Florida cattlemen in 1975 did not include anything about the environment, but they are at the top of the list now. I expect the pendulum of interest will swing back at times toward production, but environmental issues are not a tempest in a teapot because they come from our citizens. These issues have changed the University of Florida - IFAS in terms how much money we receive, who we hire, and what they do. Environmental issues even change what we call ourselves. I am certain the Agronomy Department at the University of Florida will be changed in the near future to include some reference to the environment.

In retrospect, a more important finding of my first research project on wildlife food plots was the fact many of the principles of agronomy and other agricultural sciences can be applied to environmental management. This is why faculty at the University of Florida - Range Cattle REC will continue to make a valuable contribution to the Florida cattleman. Right now the graduate student who will follow my career at Ona is probably giving a seminar in an 'environmental' department somewhere, and the results will be considered as timely and practical. As has been my privilege, that person will serve a sincere, knowledgeable, and friendly clientele, the Florida cattlemen. My best wishes to you all.



**As with planting and managing forages for cattle, plantings for wildlife should fill a specific need.**