

Try Lure Crops to Mitigate Wildlife Damage

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“Wildlife damage to agricultural crops continues to be an issue”, says John Kinghorn, Provincial OSCIA Director for Durham, Victoria and Halliburton Counties. “In fact, several resolutions at our recent annual meeting addressed this ongoing concern.”

Exploring the potential of lure crops to deter wildlife from consuming higher value agricultural crops may be one approach that can ease the situation.

Jim Hopkins, a cow-calf producer in Baddow, just north of Fenelon Falls, began experimenting with wildlife food plots in 1998 in cooperation with the Ministry of Natural Resources. They were planting food plots as supplemental feed for deer, but as Hopkins notes, “It didn’t take long to see the potential for drawing deer from other crops.”

Tony Jackson farms in Perth County, primarily cash crop with a 20% hay rotation, and also has experience with food plots. He has a passion for things both wild and agricultural and sits on the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters Big Game Advisory and Agricultural Liaison Committees, as well as the Board of Directors for the Thames River Conservation Authority and the Perth County Stewardship Council.

“There’s no ‘magic bean’ that will solve the wildlife damage issue,” says Jackson. “Finding that balance between natural environment and agricultural production is a tough one.”

Jackson offers three cardinal rules for using lure crops as a tool for dealing with wildlife damage. “First, put lure crops where wildlife wants to be naturally. Second, as a food source, the lure crop has to outcompete what you want wildlife to stay away from. And third, pay attention to wildlife preferences.”

While other species such as raccoon and Canada Geese can be more significant culprits in causing crop damage, most of the work on food plots relates to deer. Knowledge of deer behaviour and nutritional needs goes a long way in optimizing use of food plots and minimizing deer damage.

“Good quality natural food (beech nuts, acorns, apples, grasses and woody browse) and extensive tracts of natural habitat, including forest edges and marginally productive land, offer a low-cost natural lure crop for deer as your best defence against crop damage,” explains Jackson. “Manage your wood lot using best forestry management practices. This can

promote new growth attractive to deer. Plant a food plot seed mix on log landings and in openings to further enhance food sources. Prune and fertilize apple trees, both planted and wild, to maximize fruit production.”

Clover and alfalfa are Jackson’s top choices for planted lure crops, both relatively easy and inexpensive to establish. Jackson has found that a small percentage (2%) of Puna Chicory added to a clover/alfalfa field offers a taste that deer prefer, in essence creating a “wildlife salad bar”.

“Maintenance mowing is critical to success as a lure crop,” Jackson advises. “Plan your mowing so fresh new growth is available as crop maturity and harvest approaches.”

A buffer strip along a wood lot separates high-priced crop from wood lot edge. If sufficiently wide, manage the buffer as a harvestable crop, e.g. grain underseeded with clover/alfalfa allows a harvest, with the new-growth forage offering a food source for wildlife.

Seeding ryegrass, clover and brassicas (e.g. stubble turnips, kale, forage rape and swedes) after a grain crop harvest, especially in fields next to wood lots, also deflects pressure from other crops. Even easier is under seeding these lure crops at planting time. Brassicas sweeten up after frost, becoming highly attractive to deer.



Photo credit: T. Jackson

“Another strategy is to change the pattern of deer movements by incorporating mineral and salt pits strategically between bedding areas and food plots,” notes Jackson. The pits become more effective over time and should be permanently established.

Further east, Jim Hopkins has established three wildlife food plots over the last ten years. Deer were grazing heavily in his hayfields, particularly in October on first and second year alfalfa, and he was interested in potential alternatives.

Hopkins planted a 2 1/2 acre food plot in 2000 with a seed mixture called Fall Field of Dreams. Made up of Puna Chicory, alfalfa, trefoil, red and white clovers, alsike clover, fodder rape, stubble turnip, kale, millet and ryegrasses, it's suitable for planting in fallow fields, clearings, trails, and along hedgerows. It can be sown in spring through to early fall, as well as frost seeded.

Hopkins subsequently planted the perimeter of this plot with stubble turnip and a winter wheat cover. In its second year, he cut and disced it in July after the turnip had gone to seed. The seeds sprouted and produced new top growth which deer grazed in early October. "Early the following spring, deer pawed up the turnips and ate the roots," Hopkins observed. "It was like candy to them."

Maintenance is fairly straight forward. The plot is cut and baled once per year. Hopkins recommends using a thin cover crop, if any, with food plot mixtures and to plant thinly. "Planting too thickly raises the cost and reduces the success," Hopkins explains. "I walk as I broadcast the seed and can cover a good area. A seed drill plants too thickly."

Hopkins has planted alfalfa and clover along the edge of the laneway across from this plot and will watch for wildlife grazing. Farm laneways and ditch banks frost seeded with a mix of clover types, including annuals and perennials, can provide a variety of maturity and taste options.

Last fall Hopkins planted another third of an acre next to a cedar bush. He used the same seed mix with winter wheat as a cover crop, after working it for two years, then letting it summer fallow to reduce weed competition. While the cover crop is not necessary, it offers an attractive early spring lure crop.

Hopkins plans to plant stubble turnips late this May on his original 4-acre food plot. Stubble turnips have value as cattle feed in enhancing milk production, as well as being attractive to deer. "We'll fence the cattle out until it's well enough established to tolerate grazing, likely in September," Hopkins says, "and I expect the stubble turnips and seed mixtures in the

food plots will be more attractive to deer than alfalfa in the hayfields, come October."

Food plot seed mixtures are available through Speare Seeds in Harriston and Parson Seeds in Beeton.

"The cost of establishing food plots is minimal," notes Hopkins. "You can always put the plot back into hay or another crop. It's not expensive to experiment, but it's important to observe carefully what happens." Hunters given permission to hunt a property are often willing to contribute to costs and labour of seeding and maintenance of food plots. Fencing to exclude livestock is an additional cost where food plots are adjacent to pastured land.



Jim Hopkins

Jackson and Hopkins both emphasize the importance of other management options in concert with lure crop plantings. Visit areas on your property at times that wildlife are feeding to disrupt their patterns and encourage them to look elsewhere for food. Allow hunting on your property to reduce wildlife populations through legal harvest.

Work with managers of forested public land to ensure the land is managed with regard for neighbouring land uses, especially agriculture. There is potential for properly managed lure crops on such properties. If you rent land, negotiate a reduced rental rate or establishment of lure crops on areas where yields are compromised due to wildlife damage.

Under the new agricultural policy framework, Growing Forward, cost-share funding is available to Ontario producers with an Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) Third Edition deemed appropriate through peer review. Category 23 offers 30% funding up to \$10,000 through the Canada-Ontario Farm Stewardship Program for eligible best management practices that reduce crop, livestock or property damages caused by managed wildlife species.

For further information, please contact the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, Guelph, Ontario. Telephone: 1-800-265-9751 or website: www.ontariosoilcrop.org