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**Food Plots for Song Birds**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Birds are commonly seen flying through backyards, occasionally perching in a tree, or on a fence. Some may even choose to build nests in your backyard. If you have wondered how to attract more birds to your yard and encourage them to stay awhile, a good way to do so is to provide feed for them. The type of birds you attract will depend on the type of feed provided and the location of the feed.

While a bird feeder is great for a backyard, birds can also be attracted with a food plot designed specifically for them. A food plot is an area where plants that are desirable to birds are grown to provide them feed, cover, and habitat. Like all animals, birds require food, water, and shelter. Food is often the resource that is hardest for them to find, especially during the winter. However, a good food plot can help attract birds to your ground throughout the year.

If you are new to feeding birds and are wondering what type of feed birds prefer, black oil sunflower seeds are the most appealing to a variety of bird species. In addition to black oil sunflower seeds, white proso millet is also preferred by many birds, especially dark-eyed juncos, sparrows and the red-winged blackbird. A few other types of plants that are suitable to plant to attract songbirds (as well as other birds) are: sorghum, cereal rye, pearl millet, buckwheat, and cowpeas. Native grasses such a big and little bluestem, indian-grass, and switchgrass can provide cover in larger food plot. Adding certain shrubs into the mix can provide both cover and another food component.

Planning a food plot begins with determining what size of food plot is available and what is going to be grown. Much like a garden or crop, food plots start with fertilizing and tilling the soil. A soil test is the best way to begin. Fertilizer rates will likely be around 2 lbs. nitrogen and 2 to 3 lbs. phosphorus per 1000 sq. ft. Potassium will likely also be a part of the fertilizer mix. It is important to not over-do nitrogen fertilizer in small food plot as this can lead to decreased seed production and tall plants that tend to fall over. Soil pH might need to be adjusted with applications of lime but only after confirmed with a soil test.

An application of glyphosate could be needed to clear the area of grass species like fescue and bermuda. This should be done a few weeks before planting. Be sure the herbicide used does not include another herbicide with a long residual that can affect germination. Soil temperatures need to reach at least above 60 to 65 degrees for some summer grain crops.

Planting depth is directly tied to the size of the seed. Sunflower seeding depth is from 1 to 1.5 inches, white proso and pearl millet seeding depth is .5 inches, and buckwheat is around one inch. Ideally, food plots will be a mixture of species. If mixing the sunflowers, millet, and buckwheat together, then a seeding depth of 0.75 inches should be good enough for all three. Of course, rows of specific species close to each other will work as well. For large areas where hand seeding is impractical and a seeder or drill is unavailable, broadcasting seed and then cultipacking can work, however success depends on timely rains.

Weeds will likely be an issue in a food plot on new ground and there will be few herbicide options. Mostly, some weeds are just part of it. Ragweed and foxtail seeds are actually pretty high in protein and preferred by some birds.

Don’t be discouraged if a food plot doesn’t attract birds in early fall, right after the crops go to seed. Birds have lots of food options at that point. When birds start migrating later in the winter, this is when your food plot will be a welcome sight for the weary travelers.

Contact your local Extension Office if you are interested in finding out more about the types of feed different bird species prefer, how to grow a food plot, or would like more information on the what bird species can be found in your area.

For more information, please contact Adaven Scronce, Diversified Agriculture and Natural Resource Agent, adaven@ksu.edu or (620) 331-2690

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