

Second Time the Charm: Recovery Plot Secrets Revealed

By: Ed Haag

Just because it is already fall and your summer planted food plots appear to be failing there is no need to despair---a second try could be the charm.

In the past if your food plots didn't show some serious growth by mid-September it was time to consider pulling the plug on Plan A and start looking for another site to set up your blind. "Not so fast," says plant breeder Kurt Braunwart. "That might have been true in the past.

Over the past decade Braunwart, working with Progene LLC of Othello Washington, has participated in the development and released several forage annuals---both grains and legumes---that are well suited for fall seeding. Combined with late-planting strategy the package promises to change how and when food plots are established.

Braunwart does not believe that the new, late planting strategy will become the norm but, he feels, that having the option to plant later in the season could prove a valuable tool for the grower who fails to get his early plot established. "Replanting four to five weeks before opening day would allow for a late planted forage crop, such as peas, to be up and visible within two weeks," he says. "That should give the deer enough time to locate and familiarize themselves with the recovery plots by hunting season."

While it looks like wildlife food plot planters will be a major beneficiary of Progene LLC's work the initial research was directed specifically towards a much larger constituency---U.S. beef producers. "With the rising costs associated with cutting and baling cattlemen who can extend their grazing season beyond the summer can make major savings," says Braunwart noting that avoiding the need to cut, bale, and transport hay can mean \$14 per ton less (2008 USDA estimate) in forage production costs. "There is no reason that in mild years, a beef producer in our part of the country can't graze his cattle through the winter using these annuals."

He adds that these same plants that allow beef producers to cut their hay production costs, could, under the right circumstances, allow a food plot grower to put in a recovery plot in September and hunt over the same plot later that fall and winter.

Same Seed, Different Game Plan

For Braunwart the key to planting successful recovery plots is selecting the right plants, the right ratios and the right rates for the job. Forage annuals---both grains and legumes---are classed as either spring varieties or winter varieties. Spring varieties are planted in the early spring and harvested in the fall. Winter varieties are planted in the late summer or early fall, begin their growth cycle and establish themselves before going into dormancy in the winter. In the spring, they come out of dormancy and grow to maturity by early to mid summer.

Braunwart points out that if you want your food plots to establish themselves quickly while remaining viable into the winter a combination of spring and winter plants is advised. The spring varieties will establish more quickly and create a protective canopy over the slower emerging winter varieties. “Once a hard frost hits, the spring plants will die back and the winter plants will take over,” he says noting that the same concept applies to both summer plantings and fall recovery plantings.

What is different says Braunwart are the ratios of one seed in the mix to the other and the seeding rates.

He warns that before considering replanting after a food plot failure make sure that you know why that failure has occurred. If it is not an obvious reason such as drought, weather related or due to excessive browsing be sure to check with your local extension agent for a disease or pest evaluation and run a soil test to make sure the failure was not due to some sort of deficiency.

All in the Ratios and Rates

Once the actual cause of the failure has been determined and the appropriate mitigation steps taken Braunwart recommends the following changes to one’s summer blend. “For the appropriate recovery mix you will need to increase your ratio of spring annuals to winter annuals and increase your overall seeding rate,” he says.

Braunwart cites, as an example, successfully used white flower pea blends. “In a summer planting you would use one third Journey—a spring pea and two thirds Whistler or Nutrigreen---both popular winter pea varieties,” he says. “The seeding rate would be around 70 to 90 lbs to the acre.”

For the fall planted blend Braunwart recommends changing the ratio between spring and winter peas to 50/50 and increasing the planting rate by 20%. “Because the rate of growth is faster in the late summer than it is in the fall you don’t need so many spring peas to establish a stand earlier in the season,” he says.

Conversely you need more spring peas in the fall planting because their growth is slower in the cooler weather says Braunwart.

Same Concept for Grain Annuals

Braunwart’s research into fall planted annuals has not been restricted to peas. Because the cattle industry is also interested in production systems that use non legume annuals he has been directly involved in developing both spring and winter varieties of forage oats and forage triticale. “This fall planting strategy applies equally well to oats and triticale,” says Braunwart. “Our success in extending the cattle grazing season with these annuals has been quite remarkable.”

ProgeneLLC is currently evaluating its grain annuals for food plot applications and is very pleased with its initial results. The company will be releasing specific food plot grain annuals in the near future. Questions and inquiries are welcome and should be sent through the ProgeneLLC.com website or directly to Kurt@ProgeneLLC.com.