



Small Scale Solutions for your Farm

Managing Natural Vegetation
Early Successional Habitat Management



Do You Have Small Areas On Your Farm That You Are Not Using For Production?

Would you like to attract more wildlife to your farm?

“Early successional” plants are those that first grow on an area following a disturbance, such as a fire. Managing these plants that grow naturally on your farm can provide habitat for common wildlife species such as deer, rabbits, quail, turkey, doves, and songbirds.

Purposes and Benefits of Natural Vegetation

- Easy and inexpensive to establish and maintain
- Can be established on small areas such as field edges, areas where crops are not productive or where equipment is hard to operate
- Provides a diversity of fruit, browse, seeds, insects, structure and cover, important to many kinds of wildlife
- May increase diversity and populations of wildlife, pollinators and other beneficial insects on the farm

Early Successional Vegetation That Benefits Wildlife

Early Successional habitat includes a variety of native grasses, saplings, and small shrubs that provide food and cover for nesting, raising young, escaping from predators, and resting. These areas also attract beneficial insects, which prey on insect pests in crop fields, and provide food for quail, turkey and songbirds.



Early successional vegetation includes grasses, shrubs, and wild flowers that grow naturally on your farm and can provide important habitat for wildlife.



Edges of waterways and other areas that are difficult to farm can be managed for wildlife habitat.

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Fruits

Important fruits include wild grapes, plums, hawthorns, blackberry, greenbrier, rattan vine, and blueberries. These plants also provide cover for nesting, resting, rearing young, and escaping predators.

Seeds

Seeds of various plants are important to many birds and small rodents. Small seeds, like those produced by pigweed, lamb's quarters, foxtail grass, and crabgrass, are favorite foods of doves.

Browse

Many species of wildlife browse on new growth of plants, nipping off the leaves, young shoots and tender branches. For deer and rabbits, browse forms the bulk of their diet. Many other wildlife species graze at least occasionally on grasses, weeds, tender leaves, twigs, and buds.

How To Establish and Maintain Natural Early Successional Vegetation

Areas to consider for establishment and management of natural vegetation include field edges, fields that are not being cropped, openings in woodland areas, and areas in cropland fields that are unproductive or difficult to farm.

Natural vegetation can be established and maintained with periodic disturbance, such as mowing, disc harrowing, herbicides, prescribed fire, or a combination of these to promote desirable native grasses, weeds, saplings, and small shrubs. A different portion of the area should be disturbed each year, allowing vegetation of different ages to continue to grow on the remainder of the area for 2 to 3 years.

Another option is to combine strips of native vegetation with strips of field crops that attract wildlife. This approach is best if you want to concentrate the animals for hunting or wildlife watching.

Vegetation should not be disturbed from the late spring through early fall, the nesting season for many birds.

Disking – Disc harrowing is a preferred method of disturbing the soil and vegetation. The only equipment needed is a tractor and disc harrow. The blades on the harrow should be set as straight as possible.



Natural areas provide supplemental food sources to all kinds of species.



These may look like weeds, but to many wildlife species this would be a perfect place to find food, nest, raise young, escape from predators, or rest.



Blacktailed deer browsing on weeds growing in tall grass.

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You will not want to plow the ground as if you were planting a crop. Instead, only disturb the soil surface and leave some vegetation on the ground. Also, try to follow the contour of the land whenever possible.

Only harrow one-third to one-half of the area each year. It is often easiest to disk strips across an area, skipping one or two strips on each pass, then returning to disk these strips over the next 2 years. Timing of harrowing changes what vegetation will come up.

Disking during the cooler winter months usually encourages the growth of fall seeded plants like ragweed, partridge pea, beggar weeds and lespedezas. Pay attention to what comes up, and if you do not get the vegetation you want, change the time of harrowing the next year.

Mowing

Mowing can be used to maintain and encourage browse, fruit, seed and in-sect production. Mowing in the early spring stimulates browse and fruit production on greenbrier and blackberry.

Mow about one half of the area the first year, and the other half the following year.

Prescribed burning

Controlled fire can also be used to disturb grasses and weeds and to kill saplings and shrubs after 2 to 3 years of growth. Sufficient firebreaks are needed on the boundary to avoid burning adjacent areas.

Associated Costs

Establishing and maintaining early successional habitat on your farm is relatively inexpensive if you already own a tractor and disc harrow or mower. Annual costs may include:

- Equipment time, fuel, maintenance
- Labor for establishment and annual maintenance
- Less crop production area if some areas are no longer cropped



Managed borders of natural vegetation can attract beneficial insects for pest control and provide important wildlife habitat.

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Technical and Financial Help Is Available

Whether you measure your farm in terms of feet or acres, your local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office has experienced conservationists that can help you develop a Conservation Plan to conserve, maintain, and restore the natural resources on your land and improve the long-term health of your operation.

There is no charge for our assistance. Simply contact your local office to set up an appointment. You may also be eligible to receive financial assistance. Your NRCS office will explain any programs that are available so you can make the best decision for your operation. All NRCS programs and services are voluntary.

For More Information

Visit the [Natural Resources Conservation Service](#) or visit farmers.gov/service-locator to find your local NRCS office. You can also check with your local USDA Service Center, then make an appointment to determine next steps for your conservation goals.

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NRCS conservationist assisting small scale farmer with developing a customized conservation plan.

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