Wildlife planting is one of the most commonly applied management activities throughout the Southern United States. The primary focus of these plantings has been to provide game species with additional or supplemental high-quality forage. Food plots have continued to grow in popularity and practice among modern game managers. Food plots have typically focused on cool-season grains (wheat, oats, rye, triticale, etc.), warm-season grains (corn and milo), legumes (beans, peas, clovers, etc.), and brassicas (rape, turnip, radishes, etc.). Each year information on new varieties and novel species emerges through the countless outdoors/sportsman informational outlets. Planting food plots has become a huge industry. Seed, herbicides, soil amendments, and equipment used by the wildlife manager were once the same as those used in the agronomy and livestock industries. Today, each of these things is tailor-made and custom fit specifically for the wildlife manager. It only makes sense when you realize the scale of food plots in the South.

Charles Ruth, with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, collected data on food plot acreage for the Coastal Plain of South Carolina several years back. What he found was astonishing. In just the Coastal Plain, there were an estimated 182,000 acres of food plots. Compare that with the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) numbers for modern agriculture where we saw statewide corn acreage of 350,000 acres, cotton at 300,000 acres, soybeans at 335,000 acres, and peanuts at 65,000 acres in 2019. Keep in mind those numbers are statewide estimates where the food plot acreage is only for the Coastal Plain. This really puts into perspective how big the food plot industry and practices are in South Carolina. It also illustrates that there is a willingness of game managers to invest heavily in wildlife plantings because they see the benefits to game species.

Wildlife plantings are beginning to take on a much different look than the common food plots that we are all familiar with. The most recent USDA Farm Bills have emphasized supplying adequate food and cover resources for native pollinators. Pollinators were long overlooked by land and game managers, as the focus was primarily on deer and turkey. Sure, we noticed the bees in clover, but most likely we did not look any further into it. Today, we are starting to take a closer look at pollinator plantings, and what we are seeing is a big benefit to our wildlife management goals.

Pollinator plantings consist of a wide variety of native annual and perennial flowering plants, legumes, and warm-season grasses. Plant species are selected that have documented pollinator usage, are fit for the specific site conditions, and are available from seed suppliers. Species like ragweed, black-eyed susans, ticktrefoils, coreopsis, coneflowers, asters, native lespedezas, milkweeds, and bluestem grasses commonly show up in pollinator seed mixes. While the species selected for planting were derived from their pollinator
value, their benefits extend beyond that. These plantings offer exceptional bugging opportunities for turkey poults and quail chicks. These bugging areas are often limited in typical food plots. Additionally, the pollinator plantings consisting of primarily broadleaf flowering plants offer cover due to their growth characteristics. This cover allows poults and chicks to move freely and safely on the ground under the canopy of the flowering plants. Avian predators have difficulty in locating prey and launching successful attacks in well-established pollinator plantings.

Deer managers are also finding value in pollinator plantings. Deer have long been known to consume a wide variety of plants, but we often overlooked the value of native plants. We focused on the common food plot species that had significant data behind them to illustrate the nutritional value of the crop. When we started looking at the nutritional quality of native plants, the results were shocking. Most of the species planted in pollinator plantings have nutritional values as good as the food plot species, and several of the pollinator species are superior to food plot species in digestibility, crude protein, etc. Additionally, the native plants evolved with the South’s environmental conditions. They can tolerate those 100-degree days and intermittent drought periods during the growing season. They can supply sufficient seed production to keep themselves going. Most importantly, the species diversity in those plantings means, regardless of the condition, there will be some forage/browse available to deer.

Pollinator plantings are way bigger than just a food plot for bees and butterflies. Pollinator plantings should be viewed as a utilitarian management activity, meaning they do a lot of good for a lot of species. Depending on your management goals, these plantings may be a perfect fit for your management program and make great additions to your current plantings. They promote diversity and ensure that many wildlife species have food and cover and also make great field borders for existing food plots.

Pollinator plantings are the new chapter in wildlife plantings, and I expect that chapter to continue to grow as we learn more about their benefits. Spend a little time online reviewing the information on pollinator plantings. I would encourage you to think about how and where you can incorporate them into your management program. As always, if you need more information or technical assistance please feel free to reach out to me or your local Clemson Extension Agent.

For further information on pollinator plantings see the links below.

Using Farm Bill Programs for Pollinator Conservation

Plants for Pollinators
https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/national/plantsanimals/pollinate/?cid=NRCS143_022326

Selecting Plants for Pollinators
https://www.pollinator.org/PDFs/Guides/SoutheastMixedForestsSFINAL.pdf

Pollinator Habitat Planting

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https://www.clemson.edu/extension/forestry/newsletter/newsletter_files/2020-spring-forestry-newsletter

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