

Feature

Game cover crops



Christopher Bright of NGO sponsor, Bright Seeds, suggests how to grow successful game crops.

COVER CROPS ARE ESSENTIAL FOR MOST shoots but, although establishing them is no different to growing other crops, basic husbandry is often ignored. The better the seedbed, the better the establishment. It is therefore important to address compaction and the level of organic matter in the soil. Test the soil to determine levels of pH, nutrients, potash, phosphate and trace elements needed.

Crop rotation will help to prevent build-up of weeds, pests and disease (not so easy when you have to grow cover crops in the same place each year). Brassicas (eg. kale) are susceptible to club root so cannot be grown in the same plot year after year.

Your choice of crop or mixture will depend on what you want the cover for. Maize is an effective and reliable cover crops for both partridges and pheasants, but cannot be used in a mixture for which grant is claimed under Environmental Stewardship. However, where the cover forms an important drive, maize may be the best choice either on its own or in a mixture.

Most varieties of maize grown for cover are hybrids and should not be sown at more than 42,000 seeds per acre. If sown at a higher rate, the plant grows tall with weak stems. Numerous varieties and mixtures are available; Bright Seeds' most successful is Flightpath, which is relatively short, stands until February and has a high yield of grain. It has been known for crops such as this to be combined in February.

Where the cover is not so critical and cost is a consideration, you may be able to claim a grant through Environmental Stewardship by growing 'wild bird seed mix'. To qualify, mixtures must contain at least three separate species, of which none may be more than 70% by weight. The aim is to provide seed as feed for farmland birds which is why some sorghums are not allowed as very few produce seed, and maize is too large for most of the birds targeted. Most



Lightning mustard with maize. This provides a good cover and food for game over the winter.

commonly grown mixes include cereals, kale, quinoa, linseed, millet, mustard, fodder radish and grain sorghum.

The exact mix you choose with will depend on your objectives such as standing power, especially in winter weather, and feed value. The specific birds targeted will influence your choice; for example, Bright Seeds' grey partridge or its extremely popular 'pheasant and finch' mixtures may be appropriate. Location, altitude, exposure and soil type will also have an influence, so seek expert advice before making your final choice.

Seed quality and availability is especially important this year because of the poor seed yield and the germination of 2012 seed crops. There is a shortage of certain seed across the world which will affect the availability and price of game cover. Buy your seed from a reliable source, one who can show minimum germination test results. There is a surprising variation in success rates, so spend your money on high quality seed.

This is particularly true of maize, a semi-tropical species that can only be grown successfully on exposed sites in this country because of advances in plant breeding. It is still one of the best game cover crops available, capable of coping

with most weather conditions and lasting until well after Christmas. It can also be sprayed with effective herbicides that help when cleaning up land after other cover crop mixtures. Although maize had a difficult year in 2012, it was the second wettest year in a century and all agricultural crops struggled. Two years out of 100 is not a bad record when it comes to reliability, although last year highlighted some areas where maize should never be grown, even in good years.

Maize seed kept from one season to the next may have a low vigour score. At Bright Seeds we carry out an expensive cold germination test on all maize seed to expose any potential problems. Seed vigour is especially important in wet cold years like 2012, when it can make the difference between surviving and dying.

Protection against weeds, pests and diseases is vital too. A false seedbed is one way of limiting weed growth and species such as maize can be sprayed with an effective herbicide. Use seed dressings, especially in brassicas to control flea beetle. It may also be necessary to follow with an application of insecticide. Nurse crops can be useful, for example

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sowing kale with mustard. The mustard establishes first and can take the pressure off the kale, both in terms of flea beetle and pigeons.

Some mixtures will last into a second year. Kale, in particular, provides good cover in its first year and then seeds in its second, offering excellent feed value. Not having to establish a new crop is a significant cost saving.

Where a relatively large block of cover is to be grown, the plot may be split with half planted to maize and half to a wild bird seed mix. In this case, at least some grant may be recovered through Environmental Stewardship and the two crops may be swapped each year, allowing some rotation to limit pests and disease and a chance to clean the ground with herbicides.

Timing of sowing is the next consideration and there are no prizes for drilling first. There is a relatively broad window from the end of April to early June so it is more important to have the right conditions than to drill early. Semi-tropical species such as maize, millet and sorghum should not be sown until the soil temperature has reached a consistent 10°C.

Birds such as grey partridges require nesting and brood rearing as well as winter cover, so where you want to encourage wild birds, grow other crops and mixtures. Grass margins around fields with or without wild flowers are commonly grown now and can provide

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Bright's Pheasant and Finch mix is particularly good for wild birds.

good nesting cover, especially if protected by a hedge. Mowing no more than half the margin allows tussocky growth of species such as cocksfoot which give cover from predators and the elements. Beetle banks can do the same and provide a haven for insects and small mammals too.

Insects are an important food source, especially to grey partridge chicks in the first three weeks of life, so that is a major requirement of brood rearing cover. Many of these insects live on arable weeds, so the use of herbicides is one of the major reasons for poor chick survival. In cereal crops, conservation headlands that receive no fertiliser or herbicides

aimed at broad-leaved weeds can be useful, particularly when placed next to good nesting cover.

Another option here is a 'nectar flower mix', also subject to grant aid through Environmental Stewardship. These mixtures, usually based on legumes such as clover, vetch, trefoil and sainfoin, boost natural food availability for insects like butterflies and bumblebees.

Wildflowers for summer colour and insect activity are also becoming popular in small areas and can be treated as a biennial or perennial crop. Although they do not have winter standing power, they are a useful addition to a mixture or sown in an area that is important for summer brood rearing and late summer cover. Cornfield annuals are excellent for this and fast to establish, they brighten up areas on the shoot gaining points for conservation and a talking point locally.

In the dull wet conditions last year many crops were poor or failed altogether, with some providing no cover. Later sown crops came into their own. Utopia, a cross between black mustard and a wild Ethiopian kale, can be sown as late as July and proved exceptionally useful. There are improved varieties of mustard, too, such as Lightning which, like Utopia can withstand all but the hardest frosts. Some mixtures are also available for summer sowing based on mustard, forage rape, stubble turnips and fodder radish.

Another way to counter a difficult season is to use perennial cover crops such as canary grass, chicory, miscanthus or artichokes. Some experts suggest that these crops should form 10-15% of cover in any year and there is certainly a lot of interest now following the difficulties of 2012. Once established, they must be managed. They are expensive to establish, but provide long-term cover although have little or no feed value for game and farmland birds. They must therefore be used in conjunction with other covers that do.

A wildflower mix provides summer colour and food for insects.

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MORE INFORMATION

There are many game cover crop specialists around the country. The NGO is delighted to have sponsorship from Bright Seeds who can be contacted on 01722 744494, www.brightseeds.co.uk