

SALVAGING YOUR DOVE FIELD

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Sunflowers have long been a favorite crop for managers wishing to provide food for mourning doves. A successful sunflower field can provide great yields of highly preferred mourning dove food.

Additionally, once a successful crop of sunflowers is produced, the manager has many options to manipulate the standing crop to provide mourning dove food across a long period of the fall and early winter, providing excellent hunting opportunities across the entire dove season framework. But state biologists are often asked what managers can do if sunflower fields fail due to inclement weather, and how they can continue to provide food for mourning doves in this area.

One possible option is to replant some or all of the area with browntop millet. Browntop millet matures in about 60 days, and depending on how early you recognize that you are going to have a sunflower crop failure you might have time to prepare a browntop crop prior to the opener of dove season.

Even if you will not be able to have browntop ready for the fall opener, it is likely that you could have a crop prepared for use later, during mid-season hunts. Browntop millet is relatively inexpensive, is easy to grow and it does well on most Mississippi soil types. Management options for an established stand of browntop include disking strips through the standing crop, mowing and baling, and even using prescribed fire to remove plant material and expose seeds.

Depending on what types of weeds and grasses you have growing in a failed sunflower stand, management of native vegetation might be your best option for salvaging your dove field. Many native plants, such as pigweed, croton, ragweed, crabgrass and broadleaf signalgrass, provide seeds that are highly preferred mourning dove foods.

It is important to note that doves are weak scratchers. This means that they forage best in areas with lots of bare ground where seeds are readily available on top of the soil. The problem with weedy fields is providing enough bare ground so that doves can forage effectively on the seeds that are present. This is true for planted crops as well as naturally occurring weeds.

The best method to provide bare ground is by mowing strips and/or disking. Leaving some standing vegetation for cover is

also important. Arranging strips so that bare ground is next to mowed strips next to standing vegetation is a good way to maximize bar ground, food and cover.

Managers frequently ask if winter wheat plantings are a legal option for dove hunting. In Mississippi, it is currently legal to hunt mourning doves over top-sown winter wheat, as long as the wheat is planted in a manner consistent with a normal agricultural practice.



A preemergence herbicide was applied at the time these sunflowers were planted. Another herbicide was applied approximately 8 weeks after planting to control grass weeds. As you can see the result is a "clean" field of sunflowers with plenty of bare ground for doves to feed.

For example, the planting of wheat for wildlife food plots, winter grazing for livestock and erosion control are all considered normal agricultural practices. To be legal for hunting, wheat must be planted at a rate not to exceed 90 pounds per acre, and must be evenly distributed over the planted area. Wheat may not be piled or clumped.

Additional information on dove hunting regulations can be found at www.mdwfp.com and from the MSU Extension Service at <http://msucare.com/pubs/publications/p2335.pdf>.

One real shortcoming to using top sown wheat in dove fields is that the food is available for a very short period. It is not legal to continually add wheat to a planted area. Therefore, it is always preferable when possible to establish a standing crop such



This field of browntop millet was hayed to prepare for hunting.



as sunflowers or browntop millet that can be manipulated to make food available throughout the entire mourning dove hunting season framework.

Managers who experience a weather-related failure of sunflowers should not be quick to give up on this excellent planting in future years. The keys to having a successful sunflower field are early planting and weed control.

By planting sunflowers before May 15, you can ensure that the crop will mature at least two weeks before opening day. Weed control is important to maintain the bare ground that doves need to forage. There are several weed control options for sunflowers including row cultivation, pre- and postemergence herbicides or some combination of mechanical and chemical weed control.

Given that row cultivation requires specialized equipment, the best method is often a combination of pre- and postemergence herbicide applications. For best results apply a tank mix of 4 ounces of Spartan and 1.3 pints of Dual Magnum per acre at the time of planting, using either conventional tillage or no-till.

Once the sunflowers are established, grass weeds may become a problem. If this occurs apply 8-10 ounces per acre of select over the top of the established sunflowers. For postemergence applications a non-ionic surfactant should be added to the tank at a rate of 1 quart per 100 gallons of solution to improve herbicide uptake. When using herbicides it is important to always follow the recommendations on the herbicide label.

Location is also important when planning a dove field. Large open areas with a water source and nearby perching habitat such as power lines, snags or brush often work best. When planting sunflowers, fields larger than 10 acres are often necessary to offset losses from predation by other birds.

Additionally, young sunflowers are susceptible to

browsing by white-tailed deer. In areas with high deer density it may be wise to plant larger fields of sunflowers or to select other plantings such as browntop millet, sesame or buckwheat.

Dove hunting is a great way to enjoy Mississippi's great natural resources. It is also an excellent way to expose youth and families to our hunting heritage. The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks can provide technical assistance with dove field establishment and management issues.

To learn more about dove plantings, please visit www.mdwfp.com. For answers to specific questions about your field, call (601) 432-2199.



Grain sorghum or milo is another option to attract doves. As with sunflowers, early planting and weed control remain critical.