



# Springtime Wildlife “Weeds”

By *Dr. M. Keith Causey*  
Ireland Professor of Wildlife Science, Auburn University

*Reprinted with permission of the Alabama Wildlife Federation*

Generally speaking, a “weed” is a plant growing somewhere we humans do not want them to be. In natural or undeveloped environments, many “weeds” are important to wildlife. My work focuses on white-tailed deer and forbs, which is the proper term for most weeds and are very important in a deer’s annual diet. Forbs are very important to many other wildlife species as well; not only as food, but as attractants for large numbers of insects which are so critical to the early survival of bobwhite chicks and turkey poults.

Forbs are non-woody or herbaceous flowering plants, excluding grasses, sedges and rushes. Forbs include some of our most beautiful and delicate wildflowers and some of our most noxious, allergenic weeds, both annual and perennial. But for many wild animals, they are just food and cover.

As wildlife food for herbivores such as white-tailed deer, forbs are excellent. Many forbs break dormancy or germinate in late winter or early spring, providing nourishment when needed most. The young and tender shoots, stems, and

leaves of many forbs are among the most nutritious and digestible foods available. These “weeds” often contain up to 40% crude protein and greater than 70% total digestible energy. Many of these high-quality plants have short lives, and their excellent nutrient content and digestibility period may only be a few days or weeks in length. However, they are replaced or followed often by other species that are just as beneficial from late winter to late spring and beyond.

There are literally hundreds of forb species, and only a small number are not

used in some way. In a study we conducted years ago in the Piedmont physiographic region of Alabama relating to white-tailed deer food use and preference, there were 36 forb species that occurred in 10% or more of the deer stomachs analyzed during the spring season of that year. They included such “weeds” as corn salad, curly dock, dandelion, Carolina cranesbill, hop clover, daisy fleabane, vetch, wild garlic, primrose, ragweed, and goldenrod. Of course, there were many more. While deer are referred to often as browsers of woody buds, leaves, and stems, forbs are critical components of their year-round diet. In the south Texas brush country that is so famous for high-quality white-tailed deer, spring forb abundance, which is influenced by spring rainfall, often determines the degree of antler growth for any given year.

In Alabama and throughout the Southeast, many forbs grow in open areas associated with disturbed soil such as fallow or unplanted fields, pastures, road sides, ditch banks, new clear-cuts, and spoil area. Of course, other forb species grow in moist forests with closed canopies and other undisturbed habitats.

In old, southern agricultural systems, some row-crop fields were “rested” each year. These “rested” or fallow fields flourished with forbs in the spring. These “weed” fields were critical habitat for bobwhite chicks that fed heavily on the

hordes of insects associated with these fields. Today, deer, rabbits, turkey poults, bobwhite chicks, and other wildlife use similar areas in spring and summer.

Forb fields can be created by disking the soil in late summer or fall and allowing nature to take its course over the next growing season. The biggest problem in some situations will be unwanted grasses that can choke out the more desirable forbs. Fertilization and liming may be needed to create a good forb patch, but avoid heavy application of nitrogen. Applying fertilizer low in nitrogen or without nitrogen that contains phosphorus and potassium is recommended. This same type of fertilizer (0-13-13) can be applied to road sides, small openings, etc., for the same effect. Fall wildlife openings planted in small grains for deer and turkeys (wheat, rye, oats, etc.) often will contain many forb species the following spring and summer if the sowing rate of the small grains is reduced at planting time (say 1.5 bushels per acre rather than 3).

These naturally occurring, high-quality plants that are critical to many wildlife species in the spring are replaced or followed by others in the summer and fall. Additionally, many of these forbs have a growth form that provides nutrients during critical winter periods. In managing forbs, remember not to apply too much nitrogen because it can lead to domination by unwanted grass species. ♣



Photo courtesy of Rhett Johnson

*Forb fields provide critical habitat for turkey, especially young poults.*



Photo courtesy of Rhett Johnson

*Thinning and prescribed burning in pine stands are excellent management practices for promoting increased forb production.*

**Please**  
**visit the**  
*“new and*  
*improved”*  
**AFC**  
**Web Site**  
**at:**  
**www.**  
**forestry.**  
**state.al.us**