

Natural Resource ENTERPRISES

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Creating and managing old field habitats

Wildlife professionals generally acknowledge shifts in agricultural practices, mostly resulting from government programs like the Farm Bill, have encouraged significant changes to traditional landscapes across Mississippi. One landscape feature impacted by this change in agriculture policy may be termed “Old Field” habitat. At one time these old-field areas or wildlife openings may have been the result of rotational farming and livestock practices or could have been more transitory in nature and the result of clear-cutting wood lots on small farms.

The importance of these old-fields is obvious to Wildlifers but perhaps not as much to the average observer. They provide wildlife occupants increased habitat value in the way of specific cover, food, and space. The ground cover provided in these old field settings is comprised mostly of grassland areas, which supply ideal food and cover for small mammals, furbearers, and many bird species. Frequently these areas are limited on most farm settings in the Southeast.

Managing these areas can be simple or complex depending on your targeted species of interest and your proximity to urban obstacles. The best method for creating these openings and maintaining them in a forested setting is to use patch clear cuts of no more than 2 acres and implement rotational burning in your forest management plan. In agricultural areas several methods could be used to create these habitat features. For livestock operators simply use fencing to protect drainages or other sensitive areas on the farm. On agricultural properties perhaps the use of field-borders is the best way to reestablish this habitat type.

Regardless of your land coverage, several basic management prescriptions will allow you to develop and sustain these areas. Whether you are a hunter or a wildlife watcher here is a list of treatments you can use to perpetuate use by many wildlife species.

-Adam Tullos, adamt@ext.msstate.edu



Tips to Encourage Small Game Species

- Avoid abrupt transitions between forest stands, openings, fields, and drainages.
- Encourage shrub cover along borders of fields and other openings.
- Use strip plantings and strip disking to encourage use from multiple wildlife species.
- Incorporate grain-producing plants in food plot planting mixes within strip plantings.
- Create brush piles along wildlife travel corridors (i.e., rights of way, drainages, field edges).
- Use prescribed fire as often as possible.
- Retain overgrown oaks during forestry activities as wildlife rest areas.
- Encourage den trees and fallen logs as wildlife attractors.

Agritourism: Entertainment on the Family Farm

More family farms are providing unique, educational, family oriented tourism opportunities in addition to typical farm activities. As more people are living in urban settings, they are seeking out the opportunity to experience life on a family farm.

What is agritourism?

There are many types of agritourism enterprises, including you-pick operations, petting zoos, corn mazes, hay rides, pumpkin patches, and farm and dairy tours. Agritourism includes any form of farm-based tourism operation that provides economic benefit to the farm owner(s) and provides on-farm entertainment, activity, or product for the visitor.

Economics of agritourism

A survey of seven agritourism enterprises conducted by the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce demonstrated the potential economic benefits of agritourism to small landowners. In 2005, these enterprises generated \$500,000 each year from less than 100 acres. Those surveyed were relatively new businesses, 3-5 years old, and were open for about 4 weeks of the year.

Agritourism customers

A 2003 survey of visitors to 210 Tennessee agritourism operations showed that the majority (85%) of agritourism customers are from in-state; 30% of these agritourism enterprises earned between 1 and 10 dollars per customer (*Agritourism in Focus*, University of Tennessee). "Annual gross sales for enterprises ranged from \$0 to more than \$1 million" (*Agritourism in Focus*, University of Tennessee).

Where do I start?

Landowners interested in developing an agritourism operation have a variety of resources they can utilize. A listing of publications produced by various non-profit, governmental, and educational institutions are available online at <http://www.naturalresources.msstate.edu>.

Operating your own agritourism business requires many different skills in business management, marketing, and customer relations. Make use of the resources available and contact agencies such as the Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, County Extension Service, Small Business Development Center, and other agritourism operators for advice and experiences.

Landowner spotlight

Mitchell Farms



Owned and operated by Dennis, Nelda, Don, and Jo Lynn Mitchell, Mitchell Farms is a family farm and agritourism business located in Collins, MS. The Mitchells began farming cotton in 1955, but the shifting agriculture market prompted them to add peanuts to the farm, which is still one of their staple products today.

The agritourism experience

In the early 1980's the farm added the "U-pick" operation, offering tomatoes, peas, butterbeans, watermelons, and corn.

"Our success can be attributed to our hard work, being able to diversify, our location, and focusing on our product that not only includes our produce but the experience of coming to the farm," says Jo Lynn. "Everyone is greeted with a smile and appreciated for coming."

Customer service is an important issue for landowners and traditional farmers considering developing an agritourism enterprise. Customers want not only a quality product but also want a quality, enjoyable experience.

Farm diversification

The Mitchell family provide an overall experience at Mitchell Farms that has earned them loyal customers and great word-of-mouth advertising. They recently added to the agritourism experience on their farm with the additions of a pumpkin patch, Sudan grass maize, corn pool, wagon rides, tours of the farm and historic long cabin, and lakeside bonfires for groups. With this diverse offering of educational and fun activities, the Mitchells have been able to attract approximately 1,000 visitors annually.

Mitchell Farms has three seasonal agritourism offerings: U-pick produce, peanuts, and the fall tours and activities. This type of year-round utilization of their land and its natural resources provides the main source of income for the Mitchell family, but also maintains their farming tradition and enables them to share it with thousands of people each year.

Learn more about Mitchell Farms by visiting their website <http://www.mitchellfarms-ms.com> or call 601-765-8609 or 601-765-8033.

Mississippi Native Plants

Strawberry bush

This featured plant is called by several common names - burning bush, hearts-bursting-with-love, or strawberry bush. To white-tailed deer that walk Mississippi's woodlands, it is the "ice cream" plant that they cannot resist eating. So tasty is this plant that continuous browsing by an abundant deer herd has caused strawberry bush to be scarce in many parts of the state. In areas of high deer numbers, the plant is rarely a robust shrub, but merely a sparse collection of sprouts and leafless stems. Occasionally, shrub specimens can reach over 6 feet in height; however, specimens of this size are found only in places where deer are excluded, such as fenced areas or over streams with high vertical banks. If protected from intensive foraging by deer, strawberry bush can produce a very attractive shrub that produces flexible stems that make excellent switches for naughty children. At least one of the authors knows this from childhood experiences!

Strawberry bush (*Euonymus americanus*) is generally evergreen, retaining both green leaves and green stems throughout the year. This erect or trailing shrub has four angled stems that bear opposite arrangements of branches and leaves. The deep green leaves are lance-shaped and have toothed edges. From March through May, small 5-petaled flowers appear solitarily at the end of stalks arranged over leaf blades. The small flowers resemble little flattened discs of various pastel colors - cream, yellowish green, and even greenish lavender. After flowering, the warty, leathery capsules of the fruit are lime green during the summer. By late summer and fall, the fruit capsules begin to turn pinkish in color. By late September, fruit capsules are bright pink to crimson in color and resemble a ripening strawberry. As the fruit matures, each capsule opens into 3 to 5 lobes with each lobe bearing a bright orange, ovoid seed that persists and dangles from the plant into the winter. This plant is extremely attractive during the fruiting phase, earning all of its common names due to its striking appearance during fruit production.

Strawberry bush is native to the southeastern United States. It occurs in moist forests of Mississippi, such as bottomland hardwoods, ravine hardwoods with seepages and springs, and streamside forests. Strawberry bush will persist after timber harvest if



photo by Dr. Jeanne Jones

protected from damaging herbicide applications or repeated site disturbance. This plant does not compete well with densely planted pines, agronomic grasses, such as tall fescue and Johnson grass, or with invasive plants, such as Kudzu or cogongrass.

Strawberry bush has been used in recent years as a landscaping plant for native plant design and backyard wildlife habitat. In addition to its beauty, it is a good wildlife food plant. The brightly colored fruit of strawberry bush are consumed by songbirds and the seed are dispersed by birds. Wild Turkey will also eat the fruits. Swamp and cottontail rabbits eat the stems and leaves; however, because of its low availability it is not a major portion of their diet. Strawberry bush is a preferred white-tailed deer food plant and is often considered an indicator plant for deer presence because it is browsed even when deer numbers are very low. In areas of high deer populations, it may disappear!

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