

## DOVE FIELD PREPARATION: There's More Than One Way to Skin a Cat.

By Tim White

There are many ways to prepare a field for dove hunting and many crops that can be planted. It takes a great deal more effort these days to have good dove hunting when you want it without resorting to top-sowing wheat and potentially having a baited field. The right crops have to be planted in the right soil at the right time and managed and cut and/or burned at the right time! That was a mouthful. Plain and simply put, it isn't always easy to prepare a dove field.

I have included in this article information compiled from the Clemson Agricultural Extension Publication: *Wildlife Planting Guide and Native Plants in South Carolina* and from information gleaned from plantation and farm managers, and farmers across the S.E.

One problem I have seen in some dove fields is too many hunters for the amount of land. A general rule in most cases is to have an acre of area per hunter but this may vary some depending on the lay of the land. Nothing is more aggravating than to hunt in an overcrowded dove field, so consider the number of hunters you want to accommodate and plan accordingly.

Doves do not have very strong legs and prefer relatively clean ground for feeding. This can be accomplished in several ways. The use of herbicides, cultivation, mowing, and burning are all methods used to meet this end. Some crops create enough shade to reduce weed competition. Thick stubble will discourage doves from using your field!

If you want a real bang up dove shoot then do not skimp on fertilize and lime. Get a soil sample from your field and give it to your Agricultural Extension agent for testing. The best dove fields I have ever been on had a common thread to most of them and that was a huge amount of food that is readily available. Good farming practices will be rewarded with consistent dove shoots from one season to the next.

When considering what to plant in your field, consider this. A diversity of foods is usually best and some crops are preferred at different times during the season. Most people agree that corn attracts doves better when the weather turns cool in late fall. Crops that produce small seeds are usually preferred in early September. Included below is a list of commonly grown foods for doves.

1. Corn- an old favorite good for late season; when them big ol' northern doves show up! There are several ways to prepare a cornfield to attract doves. Mowing is the most common method used.

Cornfields cut for silage often attract large numbers of doves and can provide good shooting. However, to increase the amount of available food left in the field to attract doves, a pro-active hunter can make significant improvements to an average harvested-cornfield.

A hunter can approach a farmer in late summer and offer to pay the farmer to leave an acre or more of corn standing in a field he will be harvesting. This corn left standing can be mowed or cut. This increases the food base in the field and can improve hunting. For example: A good corn field may average 100 bushels per acre at the current price, a farmer might expect to gross \$250-300 per acre of corn harvested. Many farmers are willing to leave an acre or more corn standing if the hunter pays the going rate. Two acres of corn left standing in a larger, harvested field and then mowed can provide great hunting.

A particularly effective method of preparing a cornfield for dove hunting involves the use of a silage chopper to cut standing corn. Corn, either purchased from a farmer or grown specifically for wildlife, can be cut with a silage chopper for greater effectiveness. Using this method, corn should be left in rows (preferably 4 rows) scattered across the field. Disk the ground on either side of the standing rows, and use a silage chopper to cut and blow the corn onto the fresh-disked strips. This offers the maximum in availability for doves without costing much money.

2. Sunflower -Probably the overall best and certainly the most popular dove food; keep the ground clean with cultivation and herbicides.
3. Sesame -Also known as Benne and sometimes swamp pea. Grows about 4-8 feet tall; shades out most weeds; is usually planted in rows and left standing for the entire season; a choice dove food! However, Sesame requires a long growing season and requires 120-150 days to mature.
4. Millets  
White proso- Rapid growth, producing mature seed in about 45 days. Is one of the best dove feeds known due to its hard, shiny seed coat which is resistant to molding on the ground; seeds scatter readily when mowed and/or burned; It is among the best crops for September dove shoots and is my personal favorite.  
  
Dove proso- Similar to white proso but grows 3 to 6 feet; Seeds do not mature at one time but drop throughout the fall; also a top choice dove food.  
  
Brown top - Heavy seed producer, maturing in about 45 days; an old favorite for dove fields.  
  
Pearl - Grows 3 to 8 feet tall; tolerates drought and soil acidity (5.5 - 6.5); heavy seed producer; follow soil test as extra nitrogen may reduce yields.
5. Wheat - Makes a great dove field when left standing throughout the summer and burned prior to hunting in the fall.
6. Sorghum - Grain producing varieties like Milo and WGF have similar nutritional value to corn; has a small seed which is favored by doves; drought tolerant but does poorly on highly acidic soils.

There are other crops, which are attractive to doves, but the above list includes the most commonly grown. I have had great dove hunting over all these crops at various times during the seasons and I cannot say which one is best or which one is best for you. I can say this though, There's more than one way to skin a cat!