AGRII WILDLIFE INFORMATION SHEET No. 7

Growing Winter Bird Food

Some points to consider when planting winter bird food.

INTRODUCTION

Lack of food in the winter and early spring, November to March, is one of the biggest killers of farmland birds. This period is often referred to as the winter bird hungry gap. Sowing a mix of plants that provides seeds through the winter helps fill the hungry gap. Many of these plants have their seed eaten or have shed by early January so consider backing up the sown bird food with supplementary feeding, AHW2 until the end of April.

AHL2 or CAHL2 in SFI offers payment for static (2year mix) or rotational winter bird food.



Research has shown supplementary feeding is essential as it continues to provide food after sown mixes run out. This helps fill the hungry gap.



WHAT TO SOW

Aim to sow a mix of seed-bearing plants that contain a range of seed sizes. The SFI option requires at least 6 different species as part of an annual or biennial mix. However, the mixture must not include artichokes, reed canary grass, giant and intermediate sorghum, maize, miscanthus, sweet clover or tic beans for AHL2 or CAHL2. The annual mix generally provides more seed each year than the biennial which relies on kale and other brassicas in the second year. The brassica component will be attacked by flea and pollen beetle, but this is less of a problem than in oilseed rape as the brassicas are part of a mix. Seed shedding can be a problem so consider adding fodder radish which retains its seed.

Some plants are prone to lodging so the addition of stronger stemmed plants such as dwarf sorghum can help.

As a note of caution on species selection, Chicory and Fennel can, if sown repeatedly in the same place, become very dominant.



WHERE TO SOW

A sheltered sunny site such as the south or west side of a hedge or woodland edge is ideal but avoid over hanging trees. Next to woodland or a hedge offers a quick escape from predators. However, this restricts the use by birds that prefer open sites.

Remember to retain a 2-meter gap between hedge and bird food, to be in line with the buffer strip rule. Avoid planting next to water filled ditches as soil erosion, fertiliser and pesticides can get into the water. Rats also favour food sources near water.

To avoid excessive build-up of weeds consider moving the site every 3 years or rotating it with a AHL1 or CAHL1 pollen and nectar mix.



WHEN TO SOW

Every season is different, but consider March to the end of June. Aim for a warming soil with adequate moisture. This is particularly important for brassicas and linseed as they need rapid growth to get away from flea beetle. Recently there has been a general shift to later planting, May/June to get soil moisture and warmth.



HOW TO SOW

Some seeds can be very small so a firm, fine weed free seed bed is essential, similar to a good spring barley seed bed. Sowing depth is a compromise between the larger cereal and sunflower seeds and the smaller millet seeds. A good guide is 2-3cm deep. Some drill the bigger deeper seeds first then follow with the smaller shallow seeds, but this is not necessary unless drill calibration is difficult. Ring rolling after sowing helps to improve moisture retention and reduce slug problems.

Schemes require you to retain the mix until the end of February.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Fertiliser

Like other seed-bearing crops, adequate NPK is important especially for hungry crops such as kale. A minimum of 50kg/ ha Nitrogen at sowing or early establishment is suggested, but remember to apply nitrogen in the spring of second year mixes to increase kale seed production.

Herbicides

Weeds can be a problem so match your weed problem, as best you can, to a herbicide that is safe to the sown species. Take advice from your agronomist and follow label recommendations.

