

Building Better Rabbit Habitat with Native Plants



Eastern cottontail rabbits rely on a combination of food, shelter, and escape cover to thrive throughout the year. A diversity of native plants will provide these essential habitat components by offering dependable food sources, protective cover, and safe travel corridors across the landscape.

Native Grasses = Cover

Native grasses provide cover and overhead protection. They also provide rabbits with a place to dig a shallow nest. Basically, the grasses provide the structural component of the habitat.

The grasses can also provide a food source for a short period of the year when the grasses have fresh, tender shoots, but they are not a good year-round food source. During much of the year there is no reliable food source if grasses are the only habitat component.

[Switchgrass](#) is a popular grass for wildlife habitat, especially the Blackwell variety, which is a shorter, upland type. It provides excellent cover, but it is not a good year-round food source.

Native Forbs = Food

Native forbs, which could also be referred to as broadleaf plants, wildflowers, or pollinator plants, are the chief food source for rabbits. The stems and tender leaves are the primary parts of the plant that the rabbits consume.

The native legumes, which are members of a plant family within the broader umbrella of forbs, are a noteworthy addition to rabbit habitat because of their high protein content. While introduced clover species are well-known for providing rabbit forage, the native legumes are lesser-known but equally excellent – or maybe even better since a diversity of native legumes provides a “chain of forage” rather than a slug load at one time of the year. While legumes are important, they are not the only species of forbs that should be included in rabbit habitat. A diversity of plants is important!

Shrubs & Brambles = Hard Cover & Overhead Protection

Shrubs and brambles provide dense overhead protection from predators such as coyotes, bobcats, and aerial predators. They are also protection from inclement weather, such as snow and ice storms, as well as from the hottest days of summer.

Other Thoughts on Habitat

- All the habitat components should be located close to each other because a rabbit's home range is small.
- Ideal rabbit habitat is not too thick and not too thin - it should be like Goldilocks' porridge and be just right. If it is too thick, the rabbits have a hard time navigating, especially as they are young, and they don't have a place to dry off and warm up in the sunshine. However, it should not be too thin either because this results in poor cover and food distribution, and it increases the likelihood of weed invasions. Planting less than a full stand of plants and grazing are techniques to achieve thinner stands.
- Grazing can be an excellent rabbit habitat management tool as it creates open space, and grazed, diverse native grasslands are a good place to find rabbits.