

## Promoting Native Foods: An Economic and Effective Tool for Wildlife Management

By *Tilda Mims, AFC Retired*

There is a legitimate debate on native vs. non-native species when it comes to selecting plant species for wildlife management. In some well-documented cases, non-native plants once eagerly planted as preferred wildlife foods have become very invasive, choking out acres of productive land and competing with natural food sources.

James and Wanda Altiere of Butler County are among many wildlife enthusiasts making native plant species their first consideration for wildlife foods.

They find this strategy not only a cost-effective tool but one that promotes nutritional sources popular with Alabama's native wildlife.

The types of native vegetation important for wildlife are often categorized as "early successional" species. This means they are usually found in the few years following some type of disturbance, such as prescribed burning, thinning, or disking. Herbaceous plants established in the first few years following the disturbance attract dove, quail, songbirds, and herbivores such as deer.

In their young pine plantations, James and Wanda continually capture early stages of succession through regular disking. Disking in the fall every few years allows them to set back the clock, promoting quail and songbird foods like ragweed and partridge pea on the site. Blackberries, large-seeded grasses, beggarweed, and many other soft-mast

species produce fruit most abundantly when disturbed on a three-year cycle. James also prunes the young pines and bushhogs around them regularly.

To maximize site productivity, the Altieres seek out fundamental practices for increasing understory weeds, grasses, forbes, and legumes in their wildlife management plan. Fencerows allowed to grow up in blackberry and greenbriar, and a buffer strip around the pastures foster a highly productive forest edge. Forty-one acres of hardwood bottom along a creek offer exceptional wildlife

the landscape of their home, Wanda enjoys watching woodpeckers, flickers, and black-capped chickadees in the few large dead trees in their side yard. Snags also provide many of the benefits of cavity trees, such as shelter, areas for roosting, hiding, and nesting.

Many introduced plant species, including agricultural crops, are welcomed additions to any landscape and pose no threat. The Altieres have added annual and perennial cover for targeted species, fertilizing and liming to encourage productivity. Cherrybark and sawtooth oaks as well as dogwood seedlings were planted to add soft and hard mast.

Photo by Tilda Mims



*James, a wildlife biologist for the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, is Hunters' Education Coordinator for South Alabama. He and Wanda have two daughters, Riley, a senior at Auburn University, and Fuller, an 8th grade student at Fort Dale Academy.*

habitat for gray squirrels and forest interior birds while encouraging many species that require more than one habitat to make their homes.

Another excellent natural food source comes from snags that offer a buffet of insects for birds and mammals. While some people find snags unacceptable in

When they bought their 116-acre tract in 1992, they began working with AFC County Manager Paul Hudgins to develop a timber management plan that matched the needs of the species they hoped to attract. They examined opportunities to increase the wildlife value of pine stands while managing for a future timber sale. They also wanted to develop opportunities for horseback riding, target shooting, and hunting for family and friends.

By combining today's technology with the historic tradition of manipulating natural succession, they have produced habitat for a variety of wildlife species while producing recreational opportunities and timber stands, all on the same parcel of land. 🌲