Every August and September the biologists at Ducks Unlimited receive phone calls from duck hunters wanting to know what they can do or plant to attract ducks to their duck holes. It is easy to understand why the calls come in at that time of the year. Most people have busy lives and don’t really think about their duck holes until a couple of months prior to duck season. Unfortunately, the phone calls are really several months too late, because the time to start managing duck holes is in the late spring or early summer.

There really is not a “Silver Bullet” solution to attracting ducks to a particular duck hole. Making a duck hole productive is a year round process which requires forethought and planning, not something you can do a couple of months before the season. If you want to get the most from your duck hole, you must manage the impoundment in a manner that provides the essentials for ducks.

Let’s go back to Waterfowl Management 101. To make a duck hole as attractive as possible, the impoundment must provide water, food, cover and security. Since we are discussing duck holes we will assume that you have a way to hold water on the site (water level management). Therefore, we will proceed directly with the other three items (food, cover and security).

Food for ducks comes in many different forms, most people think of seeds as the primary food of ducks. However, waterfowl require a balanced diet just like humans. It must have a balance of carbohydrates (seeds, acorns, etc.) and protein (invertebrates - bugs, worms, snails, etc.). In an ideal duck hole, all of these would be available for ducks. However, all duck holes are not created equal, some are better at providing part of the diet than others. If you want to provide the greatest variety of food sources for ducks, consider managing your site for moist soils plants (MSPL). What you ask are moist soil plants? To over simplify matters, MSPL are plants that evolve and grow in wet areas. Imagine that, ducks eating seeds (carbohydrates) from plants in wet areas, what a concept! These plants are fairly easy to identify and will flourish in most wet areas if they are managed properly.
MSPL sites also have higher concentrations of invertebrates than most other habitat types. Due to the amount of biomass or structure the plants have that is a food source for the invertebrates to feed upon. The combination of seeds and bugs provide carbohydrates and protein respectively.

In most cases, cover is easily provided in an area managed for MSPL. The diversity and different heights of various MSPL provide a form of cover. Some of the plants provide food and cover (like the smartweed mentioned previously). Other plants may not be used as readily for food, but provide excellent cover like sesbania.

The last, but certainly not least item, is security. While cover provides a sense of security to ducks, preventing the birds from being disturbed is extremely important. Minimize the disturbance by leaving the duck blinds as soon as possible after the hunt. Then try to prevent people from riding around the area in vehicles or on ATVs. If ducks are frequently flushed from the impoundments, it will reduce the duck usage on the site.

Managing waterfowl impoundments is not “Rocket Science”, but can be confusing. If you feel this type of management would work on your site and want further information, contact Nick Smith or Robbie Howard, Regional Biologists for Ducks Unlimited at 318-340-1020.