

Field Notes:

October 16, 2017

Prepare for uncertainty.

By: Ernie Flint, Ph.D., CCA, Regional Specialist – Agronomy
Mississippi State University Extension Service

This week I want to depart from my usual subject matter and pick up a subject that I feel may be important to many people, not only those of us directly involved with field crops agriculture but the general public as well. This subject is that of being prepared.

As a region here in most of Mississippi we have been spared the levels of weather damage that brought destruction to our neighbors on both sides this year. And now we daily hear reports of fires out of control in northern California, destroying much of the production areas for many different crops. It seems in fact that several of our important food production areas are being damaged or severely handicapped in some way.

I would like to offer a suggestion that may cause some to snicker at my lack of faith in our food production system. Hopefully the system will continue to work and that we can look back upon this as just another exercise in caution.

My suggestion is that farmers and landowners consider planting a plot of cool season edible crops that could be utilized in the event they are needed. My intent is simply to leave this to the imagination of each one as to whether the plot should be nothing more than a large garden plot or something more. Most farms have a high well drained spot somewhere that can be utilized for this purpose. Of course the chosen spot should have reasonably good fertility and sunlight.

This can be considered as "insurance" along the same lines that we buy insurance on our homes, farm equipment, vehicles, and our health. The big difference here is that there is no fee to be paid, only the cost for a few seed and maybe a little fertilizer or lime.

There are a number of crops that can be considered for a plot like this, the first one coming to mind are the greens like turnip, mustard, kale, and radish. Chard and spinach are good additions as well as beets which can be used as a leafy vegetable providing nutrients that none of the others can. Both roots of radish and beets can be substitutes for more solid crops in food.

Straying from the greens, the carrot can be thrown into the mix as a potato substitute that packs a heavy nutrition punch. Another family of plants the legumes can contribute cool season peas as well as species such as Austrian peas that are more commonly used as cover crop plants but can be used in other ways. And lastly, it's a great idea to have a small plot of wheat or oats, possibly as a border planting to shortcut wildlife that might more heavily invade the other crops. The closer to civilization this area can be will aid in discouraging wildlife feeding, and in places where legal the area may become a good food plot for harvesting protein.

Varying degrees of effort can be devoted to this project. It may sound ridiculous to my horticultural friends, but the leafy crops along with carrots can be thrown together along with a couple bags of low analysis fertilizer like 6-8-8 or 5-10-5 in a spin spreader and planted in one pass. The fertilizer both feeds them and dilutes the stand. Just be sure to mix well. The peas should be alone as well as the cereal grain. Just scratch the soil lightly and spread in front of the next rain forecast then let Nature do the rest. You may have a few weeds, but hey this is the real world. Some of them are edible too.

Right now you can probably get a great deal on most of these seed since we are near the end of their usual planting season. Call me a prepper, a nut, or whatever you please, but you may thank me later.

Thanks for your time.