

Grasses and Forbs for Spring/Summer Wildlife Food Plots

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Many wildlife species rely on plants for food and cover. Ecologically, plants are the cornerstone of food chains. Herbivores such as white-tailed deer and cottontail rabbits depend on plants for sustenance. Bobwhites, turkey and songbirds rely on plants for food, shelter and attracting insects. Different parts of plants are consumed seasonally – leaves, stems, seeds, buds, berries or flowers. Trees, shrubs and native grasses afford cover when wildlife are resting, nesting, brooding young, escaping from predators and surviving cold winter temperatures. Some plants are especially good at attracting insects which wild turkey, songbirds and bobwhite chicks consume during critical life stages (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Cowpeas provide palatable forage for deer and wild turkey and attract insects for bobwhite and turkey chicks.

The key to providing wildlife habitat is establishing a diversity of plants which provide year-round nutrition and cover for wildlife survival. Wildlife are adapted particularly to native plants that meet many of their habitat needs. Enhancing beneficial native plants is an essential part of any habitat plan. Native forbs and

grasses can be established through creating disturbance, such as disking, prescribed fire and thinning trees. Timing is everything. Exactly when these disturbances occur and the types of plant species present in the seedbed result in different plant responses.

Landowners who are willing to experiment can gain understanding about native plant responses to these practices on their property. Those who lease land may be restricted from using practices that enhance native species, such as hunting clubs leasing industrial or commercial forest lands. In these instances, planting grasses and forbs provides patches of habitat that provide diversity and attract wildlife.

By cultivating particular plant types and seeding in strategic locations, viewing opportunities are improved. Hunters can draw wildlife into openings for selective harvesting. Others may plant near homes or cabins to enjoy seeing songbirds and butterflies or hearing bobwhites whistling in the countryside.

The following table (Table 1) lists grasses and forbs preferred by wildlife with planting information for Arkansas in the spring and summer. (For fall and winter plantings, see FSA9096, *Grasses and Forbs for Fall/Winter Wildlife Food Plots.*) Note that some plants may not survive in extreme northern- or southern-most locations of the state. Nor is this list meant to be exhaustive or exclusive of other adapted cultivars. Check with your local county Extension office before purchasing seed to be sure the climate and soil conditions are appropriate for your selected plant species.

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Table 1. Grasses and forbs suitable for wildlife food plots.

Seed type (other names) 'varieties'	Plant type	Planting date(s)	Seeding rate (lbs per acre) (PLS=pure live seed)	Planting depth (inches)	Wildlife species
Alfalfa 'Alfagraze' 'Amerigraze 401+Z'	Introduced Perennial Cool season Legume	North Arkansas March 15-April 15 South Arkansas March 1-April 15	15-20 broadcast 10-15 drilled Inoculate seeds	¼"	Cottontail rabbit White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Alyceclover (Alyce Clover) Note: Not a true clover	Introduced Annual Warm season Legume	South Arkansas May-June 15 Drought prone	15-20 broadcast 16 drilled Inoculate seeds	¼"-½"	Cottontail rabbit White-tailed deer Wild turkey
American Jointvetch (Aeschynomene)	Introduced Annual Warm season Legume	April 15-July 4	15-20 hulled seed 20-25 unhulled Inoculate seeds	½"-1"	White-tailed deer
Beggarweed	Native Annual Warm season Legume	March-June Matures in 150 days	10-15 hulled seed	Leave uncovered	Bobwhite quail Songbirds
Bluestem, Big 'Earle' 'Kaw' 'Roundtree'	Native Perennial Warm season Grass	Dec. 15-April 10	5 -10 PLS drilled	¼"-½"	Bobwhite quail Songbirds White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Bluestem, Little 'Aldous' 'Cimmaron'	Native Perennial Warm season Grass	North Arkansas Dec. 1-April 20	5-10 PLS drilled	¼"-½"	Bobwhite quail Songbirds White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Browntop Millet	Introduced Annual Warm season Grass	April-Aug. Matures 60-80 days	20-40 broadcast 8-15 lbs in 2½- to 3½-foot rows	⅛"-½"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove Songbirds Waterfowl White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Buckwheat 'Common gray' 'Japanese' 'Mancan' 'Manor' 'Royal' 'Silverhull' 'Tokyo'	Introduced Annual Cool season Grass	April 1-July 20 Matures 70-80 days	30-50 drilled 60 broadcast	< 2"	Bobwhite quail Mourning doves Songbirds Squirrels Waterfowl Wild turkey White-tailed deer
Catjang Pea (Oklahoma game bird pea) (Cajan pea) (Pigeon pea)	Introduced Annual Warm season Legume	April-July (June)	10-30 Inoculate seed	½"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove
Chickory, Forage CAUTION: Can become an invasive weed.	Introduced Perennial Warm season Forb	Aug. 15-Oct. 15	5-6	¼"-½"	White-tailed deer
Chufa (Nutgrass) CAUTION: Yellow nutgrass can become an invasive weed.	Native Annual Warm season Sedge	April 1-July 1 Matures 100-120 days Grows best alone	15-30 in rows 2-3 feet apart 30-50 broadcast Recommended plots > 1/4 acre	1"-1½"	Feral hogs Raccoon Songbirds Squirrels Waterfowl Wild turkey White-tailed deer
Coreopsis 'Lanceleaf' 'Plains'	Native Perennial Warm season Forb (herb)	July -Sept.	5-7 broadcast or shallowly drill	Surface to ⅛"	Songbirds White-tailed deer

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Corn CAUTION: A fungus fungus called aflatoxin can form on corn and potentially cause illness or death of wildlife.	Introduced Annual Warm season Grain	April-May	10-15 drilled in rows 36 to 40 inches apart	1"-1½"	Black bear Bobwhite quail Cottontail rabbit Mourning dove Songbirds Squirrels Waterfowl White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Corn, Quail Note: small kernel, developed to be less susceptible to aflatoxin	Introduced Annual Warm season Grain	April-May	10-15 drilled in rows	1"-3"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove Songbirds Waterfowl
Corn, Dwarf Extra Early	Introduced Annual Warm season Grain	March-July Matures in 65 days	10-15 drilled in rows	1"-3"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove Songbirds Waterfowl
Cowpeas (southern peas) (blackeye peas) (crowder peas) 'Clay' 'Calhoun' 'Chinese Red' 'Iron' 'Red Ripper' 'Combine' or 'reseeding'	Introduced Annual Warm season Legume	May 15-July 1	60-90 broadcast 30-80 drilled Inoculate seed	1"-2"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove Songbird White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Crownvetch 'Emerald' 'Penngift' CAUTION: Can be invasive.	Introduced Perennial Cool season Legume	April-Sept.	5-15 Inoculate seed	½"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove White-tailed deer
Deertongue Grass 'Tioga'	Native Perennial Warm season Grass	April -June	12-15 drilled 20 broadcast	½"	Bobwhite quail Songbirds White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Egyptian Wheat (Shallu) (Chicken corn)	Introduced Annual Warm season Grass	April-July Matures in 90-110 days	10-20 broadcast 4-6 drilled	¾"-1"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove Wild turkey (Not prone to damage by blackbirds)
Foxtail Millet (German millet)	Introduced Annual Warm season Grass	May-July Matures in 60-70 days	20-30 broadcast 15-20 drilled	¼"	Bobwhite quail Songbirds Wild turkey
Illinois Bundleflower	Native Perennial Warm season Forb	April-July	10-12	¼" -¾"	White-tailed deer
Indiangrass 'Cheyenne' 'Osage' 'Rumsey'	Native Perennial Warm season Grass	April-May	6-10 PLS drilled	¼"	Bobwhite quail Cottontail rabbit Songbirds White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Japanese Millet (Wild Jap) (Duck Millet)	Introduced Reseeding annual Warm season Grass	July-Aug. Matures in 60-90 days	25-40 broadcast 15-20 drilled	¼"-½"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove Waterfowl White-tailed deer
Kale	Introduced Annual Cool season Brassica	April 1-May 15 Maximum production in 90-150 days	3.5-4 broadcast	¼"-½"	White-tailed deer

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Lablab (Lab Lab) (Hyacinth bean)	Introduced Annual Warm season Legume	March-July Drought tolerant	15-20 broadcast 10 if in rows with 36-inch spacing Inoculate seeds	1"-1½"	White-tailed deer
Flat Pea 'Lathco'	Introduced Perennial Legume	April Needs 2 years to establish; plant with small grains or grasses	25	½"	Bobwhite quail
Lespedeza 'Kobe' 'Common' 'Korean' 'Marion'	Introduced Reseeding annuals Warm season Forb	South 2/3 of Arkansas March-May	15-30 common, Kobe or Korean Inoculation not necessary but may improve germination	¼"	Bobwhites White-tailed deer
Matua (Bromegrass) (Rescuegrass) CAUTION: Can be invasive.	Introduced Annual Cool season Forb	March 15-April 15	20-30 broadcast	¼"	Bobwhite quail Cottontail rabbit Mourning dove Songbirds Waterfowl Wild turkey
Oats 'Bob' 'Buckoats' 'Ozark'	Introduced Annual Cool season Grass	South Arkansas Feb 15-March Cold sensitive Drought prone	90-120 broadcast	1"-1½"	Bobwhite quail Cottontail rabbit Mourning dove Songbirds Tree squirrel Waterfowl Wild turkey White-tailed deer
Orchardgrass 'Benchmark' 'Hallmark'	Introduced Perennial Cool season Grass	Mar 1-April 15	15-20 broadcast 12-15 drilled, preferably with a legume	¼"-½"	Cottontail rabbit Songbirds White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Partridge Pea	Native Reseeding annual Warm season Legume	Feb.-April 15 Germinate slowly, over 100 days Mature in 110 days	10-20 broadcast 5-10 lbs in 36-inch rows 10-15 with cyclone seeder Inoculate seed	¼"-½"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove Songbirds White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Pearl Millet (Cattail) 'TifGrain 102' Note: Select grain- producing variety	Introduced Annual Warm season Grass	May 1-July 1	25-30 broadcast 4-10 drilled	½"-¾"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove Songbirds Wild turkey White-tailed deer
Proso Millet (Dove proso millet)	Introduced Annual Warm season Grass	April-Aug. Matures in 65-70 days	25-40 broadcast 20-35 drilled 8-10 lbs in 2½- to 3½-foot rows	¼"-½"	Bobwhite quail Morning dove Songbirds Waterfowl Wild turkey
Rape (Canola)	Introduced Annual Cool season Brassica	Feb. 1-May 15	25 broadcast 4 drilled	½"	Cottontail rabbit Songbirds White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Rice 'Lemont' 'Mars' 'Labelle'	Introduced Annual Warm season Grain	April 1-June Matures in 90-100 days	90-100 broadcast or drill Difficult to produce where blackbirds are a problem	½"-1"	Waterfowl
Rye, Cereal (Winter rye) (Grain rye) 'Elbon' 'Wintergrazer 70' 'Wrens Abrussi'	Introduced Annual Cool season Grass	Feb.-April 1	90-120 broadcast	1"-1½"	Bobwhite quail Cottontail rabbit Songbirds Waterfowl White-tailed deer Wild turkey

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Sesame (Benne) (Swamp Pea) Shattering: 'Margo' 'Oro' 'Blanco' 'Eva' 'Dulee' 'Ambia' Non-shattering: 'Baco' 'Delco' 'Rio' 'Palmetto'	Introduced Annual Warm season Forb	April 15-May 15 Matures in 85 days or 120-150 days, depending on variety	4-6 lbs in 30-inch rows 2-12 broadcast	½"-2" Depends on variety	Bobwhite quail Mourning Dove Songbirds
Sorghum 'Kafir' 'Hafir' 'Hagari milo' 'Small game food'	Introduced Annual Warm season Grain	May 1-June 15	16-30 broadcast 4-10 lbs in 30- to 36-inch rows	½"-1"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove Songbirds Waterfowl Wild Turkey White-tailed deer
Sorghum-Sudangrass Hybrids (Sudex) (Sudex Dekalb)	Introduced Annual Warm season Grass	North Arkansas May 15-July 15 South Arkansas May 1-July 15	30-35 broadcast 20-25 drilled	1"-1½"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove Songbirds Wild turkey
Soybean 'Laredo' 'Quail Haven'	Introduced Annual Warm season Legume	April 15-July 1	60-75 broadcast 30-60 lbs in 30- to 40-inch rows Inoculate seeds	1"-2"	Bobwhite quail Cottontail rabbit Mourning doves Songbirds Squirrels White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Sudangrass, Sweet	Introduced Annual Warm season Grass	April-Aug.	25	2"	White-tailed deer Wild turkey
Sunflower, Common (annual sunflower) 'Peredovik'	Native Annual Warm season Forb	March-July Peredovik matures in 90-100 days	Varies widely depending on hybrid seed type. Check bag for recommendation. Peredovik: 5-6 or 10-15 in 28- to 38-inch rows, 25-30 broadcast	¾"-1½"	Bobwhite quail Mourning dove Songbirds Squirrels Wild turkey
Sunflower, Maximilian 'Aztec' 'Prairie Gold'	Native Perennial Warm season Forb	Spring (March-May)	3 broadcast 1 in 35-inch rows Aztec: ¼-½ broadcast; 3 with spacing between seeds	⅜"-½"	Bobwhite quail Cottontail rabbit Mourning dove Some waterfowl
Swede turnip (Rutabaga)	Introduced Annual Cool season Brassica	April 1-May 15 Matures in 150-180 days	1.5-2 broadcast	½"	White-tailed deer
Switchgrass 'Alamo' 'Blackwell' 'Cave-in-Rock' 'Kanlow'	Native Perennial Warm season Grass	Dec. 15-May Slow to establish	5-8 PLS drilled 10 PLS- conventional planting	¼"	Bobwhite quail Cottontail rabbit Mourning dove Songbirds White-tailed deer Wild turkey

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Trailing Soybeans (Wild reseeding soybeans) 'Bobwhite' 'Laredo'	Introduced Reseeding annual Warm season Legume	April 15-June 1	5-8 broadcast or drilled (NRCS) 20-25 broadcast 30-50 broadcast	1"-1½"	Bobwhite quail Cottontail rabbit Songbirds Groundhogs Wild turkey White-tailed deer
Turnips, Seventop Note: Select if goal is forage production	Introduced Annual Cool season Brassica	April 1-May 15	1.5-4 broadcast 1.5-2 drilled	¼"-½"	White-tailed deer
Turnip, Purpletop Note: Select if goal is root growth	Introduced Annual Cool season Brassica	April 1-May 15	1.5-4 broadcast 1.5-2 drilled	¼"-½"	White-tailed deer
Velvet Bean	Introduced Annual Warm season	March -June	12-15 10 lbs in 15-inch rows	½"	Bobwhite quail Cottontail rabbit White-tailed deer
Winter Wheat (Forage wheat)	Introduced Annual Cool season Grass	Sept. 1-April 1	90-120 broadcast 60-100 drilled	½"-1½"	Bobwhite quail Cottontail rabbit Mourning dove Songbirds Tree squirrel Waterfowl White-tailed deer Wild turkey

Planting Tips

Before planting, be sure to conduct a soil test to determine nutrient needs. Prepare a good seedbed where seeds will contact the soil and germinate (Figure 2). Following are additional planting tips:

- Legumes.** Apply the appropriate inoculant to legumes before planting. An inoculant contains microorganisms which are applied to the seed to improve growth. Inoculants vary, as certain legume species require a particular micro-organism. Make sure the inoculant matches the plant type. Store in a cool location to avoid killing microorganisms, and discard inoculant past the expiration date.



Figure 2. After broadcasting seed, a roller firms the soil around the seeds, ensuring shallow seed placement and seed-to-soil contact.

- Native warm-season grasses.** The seed of native warm-season grasses is measured as pure live seed (PLS), a term used to describe the viability and purity of native prairie seed. PLS is calculated as $PLS = (\text{lbs seed}) \times (\% \text{ germination} + \% \text{ dormant seed}) \times \% \text{ purity}$. Warm-season grass species can be planted in the winter; however, they won't emerge until the soil warms up in April, by which time existing species like tall fescue, downy brome (also called cheatgrass) and little barley may crowd them out. Check with your local county Extension agent for details about soil testing and plant establishment.
- Avoid invasive plant species.** Invasive species increase across the landscape and reduce plant diversity, which degrades wildlife habitat. Invasive, non-native grasses and forbs found in Arkansas include bamboos, giant reed, tall fescue, Nepalese browntop, garlic mustard, Vasey's grass and johnsongrass. Two lespedeza species, shrubby lespedeza and Chinese lespedeza, at one time were recommended for bobwhites but now are considered invasive. Even native plants can be invasive, such as reed canarygrass, a warm-season perennial which is recommended for waterfowl or deer.
- Extending the life of your food plot.** Some agricultural practices can help extend your food plot and continue producing wildlife benefits. For example, wheat can benefit from planned applications of nitrogen during certain growth stages. Periodic liming of pastures can be critical for maintaining clover. These agricultural "tricks of the trade" gleaned from production agriculture can

result in more habitat availability for wildlife with relatively little effort, while maximizing your initial investment in the food plot. Ask your local county agent for assistance with extending the life of your food plot.

Common Errors

A carefully planned and properly established food plot can yield a good crop for wildlife (Figure 3). Here are some common mistakes made when establishing food plots:

- **More is better.** Exceeding the seeding, lime or fertilizer recommendation is a waste of both time and money and may negatively affect the crop. Recommendations for seeding and nutrient application have been researched and should not be exceeded.
- **Not fertilizing.** Most crops need applications of fertilizer to help them grow and achieve maximum productivity. Don't assume your soil doesn't need fertilizer. Soil test – don't guess.
- **Using old seed.** Seed that is old may not have been properly stored and handled. Make certain to use new, high-quality seed in your food plot.
- **Planting agricultural seeds in shaded areas.** Plants grown for agricultural purposes require sunlight for energy and growth. Avoid placing these seeds in shaded areas such as woods. Instead allow brushy growth in these areas, or consider seeding native plant species that are adaptable to shade.
- **Not planting enough acres.** Food plots need to be large enough that they aren't grazed down too early in the season and small enough that wildlife can flee to protective covering. As a rule of thumb, food plots should be from 1 to 3 acres and an irregular shape with brushy edges. Grain food plots should be no less than ¼ acre.

Figure 3. Ten Steps for Establishing a Food Plot

1. Select the best sites for food plots with consideration to its size and shape.
2. Check soil type, conduct a soil sample, and follow its recommendations.
3. Select plant varieties according to adaptability and soil type.
4. Check on availability of seed and order if necessary.
5. Prepare seedbeds beginning several months before planting.
6. Apply inoculant to legumes before planting.
7. Plant using the recommended rates and dates for wildlife.
8. Install exclosures.
9. Follow maintenance and management requirements to enhance plant growth and sustainability.
10. Check exclosure cages and measure your success.

- **Plant the entire field from fence to fence.** Consider planting grain on only half of the field and leaving the remaining half disked but unplanted. Native plants in the seedbed will furnish food and cover for wildlife and provide an additional measure of plant diversity that wildlife may need in times of feast or famine.
- **Planting too late for maturity.** All crops require a certain number of days to grow and mature. If the plants are planted too late, they will not mature and will fail to provide food to wildlife.
- **Planting midwest or northern seed varieties.** Because of climate differences, many seed varieties suitable for cooler climates are not well-adapted to Arkansas. Use plants that have been proven to grow in Arkansas conditions.

Measuring Success

Many land managers don't keep records about their food plots. However, these records are very beneficial as you begin experimenting with various plantings, seed mixtures and planting techniques. These records can contain the location and identity of the food plot, types and variety of plants, how the seedbed was prepared, planting dates and seeding rates, information from the soil test, type, rate and timing of fertilization and liming, planting method, maintenance and management of planting, rainfall and temperature during planting and growing season, use by wildlife, cost of establishment and maintenance, wildlife harvest in the vicinity of the food plot and evaluation of the food plot's success.

Sometimes landowners report that seeds didn't germinate or shoots emerged but disappeared. This may happen for many reasons, such as poor soil temperature or soil moisture, inappropriate soil fertility or applying the wrong inoculant or no inoculant at all. However, in some circumstances wildlife may be consuming the new growth, particularly in areas with high deer densities and smaller-sized food plots. To discover how much your food plot is being utilized, install a caged exclosure after planting seed (Figure 4). The cage is simply a small fenced-in area, usually 4 to 5 square feet, that protects plants from



Figure 4. Setting up a cage can visually demonstrate the value of your food plot for wildlife.

being eaten by wildlife. A 4- x 6-inch woven-mesh fence can be constructed with fence posts. To protect against rabbits and rodents, a smaller mesh size (e.g., chicken wire) can be added to the bottom half of the fence. The height and density of plants inside the cage can be easily compared to the surrounding food plot. Be sure to measure the height of plants in the center of the fence, as those along the outer edges are accessible to wildlife.

Digital and/or video wildlife cameras, also called game or trail cameras, can be used to visually measure wildlife utilization of food plots (Figure 5). Cameras can be purchased in many sporting goods stores and catalogs, or a homemade version can be constructed. Based on infrared technology, some camera systems detect animals by the heat they emit. Others trigger a picture when an animal crosses a beam of light. An array of camera features is available, such as recording the date and time on the picture. These cameras can be useful tools for evaluating your food plot.



Figure 5. Wildlife cameras installed at key locations provide visual evidence of wildlife using food plots.

Food Plots – The Big Picture

Food plots cannot substitute for sound wildlife and land management. Food plots are one of many tools that can lead to healthier, sustainable wildlife populations. To be effective, food plots need to be used with other practices, such as wildlife harvest strategies, prescribed burning and forest stand improvements, as part of a broader wildlife management plan. In dense deer herd situations, food plots may not even grow well until the deer herd is reduced.

Cultivated food plots may help sustain a wildlife population through careful planning and a large investment in time and financial resources.

Alternatively, encouraging native food plots or rotating natives with cultivated plantings is less expensive and provides a diversity of plantings that improves wildlife survival when other food sources are unavailable.

A food plot's success cannot be measured in a single year. Seasonal variations, an abundance of surrounding native plants, wildlife's lack of familiarity with a new or different planting, improved soil through annual amendments and wildlife population fluctuations can affect utilization of a food plot. Further questions will be generated by sowing different plant types and mixtures, enhancing native plants and testing different planting arrangements. Improving wildlife habitat can evolve into a long-term commitment of trial-and-error experimentation.

Successful land managers are willing to be creative and experiment with native and cultivated food plot designs, keep records of plant successes and assess wildlife use. This may entail sowing plant species that offer delayed nutritional value for critical times of the season when surrounding native plant species are less abundant. Another option is placing electrical fencing around food plots to keep out wildlife until plantings are able to sustain heavy grazing pressure or until nutritional shortages occur. There is no limit to the number of combinations and techniques for establishing and maintaining food plots. Developing a wildlife management plan and keeping records is necessary for understanding what works best for achieving your particular goals in attracting or sustaining wildlife on your land.

For more information about food plots, see FSA9092, *Establishing Wildlife Food Plots*, FSA9096, *Grasses and Forbs for Fall / Winter Wildlife Food Plots*, and FSA3110, *Seeding and Fertilization Rate Conversions for Wildlife Food Plots and Small Areas*. Additional information about establishing plants listed in this fact sheet can be found in FSA2139, *General Traits of Forage Grasses Grown in Arkansas*, and FSA2150, *Sunflowers Grown for Dove Hunting*. Contact a regional private lands biologist with the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (800-364-4263) for additional information about practices for establishing native plants in your area.

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