Prescribed burning in the southern Great Plains is typically conducted during the dormant season. Recently, there has been more interest and application of fire during the growing season. These fires are typically conducted in July and August. Extending the burning season into the fall (September through first frost) can help producers accomplish their goals and create opportunities to get a different response from the plant community compared to results from burning in the dormant season and growing season.

GET RID OF BRUSH WITH FALL BURNING

Work conducted by Oklahoma State University has shown that burning during September and October has the most impact on woody plants compared to any other period during the year. If brush management is a goal, fall burning might be the best time to accomplish the objectives of the burn. Keep in mind that fire only top-kills most woody plants. Over time, a well-managed burning and grazing regimen will keep woody plants at bay, especially if the woody plants are small in the beginning. We’ve found that the more mature and densely spaced woody plants become, prescribed fire and grazing tend to only maintain the current status of the woody plant community.

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IMPROVE WILDLIFE HABITAT
In addition to woody plant suppression, another major benefit of fall burning is the temporary increase in bare ground and forbs after the burn. For many species of wildlife, bare ground is important for maneuvering and gaining access to food. If the ground is bare through the winter and there is adequate moisture, winter annual forbs will provide a food source where they would be limited without disturbance. The temporary flush of forbs during the following growing season provides a great food source as well as structure for invertebrates that are critical to turkey and quail during the brooding season. This is an excellent way to increase plant diversity and structure on your property for the benefit of livestock and wildlife.

If nesting cover for ground-nesting birds is a concern, burning only a portion of your property leaves adequate nesting cover on the remainder. Over time, if no action is taken, all nesting cover is at risk of being lost. Additionally, a regimen of implementing prescribed fire in the fall or any other time of the year can create or enhance nesting habitat for many ground-nesting birds.

REMEMBER YOU SHOULD NOT BURN THE ENTIRE PROPERTY AT ONE TIME.

If you are concerned about bare ground, remember you should not burn the entire property at one time. And, the same piece of ground should not be burned year after year at the same time of year. Although the surface might be relatively bare, root systems are still intact to hold the soil. The amount of bare ground remaining after a fall burn can be controlled by monitoring soil and fuel moisture prior to a burn. Increased soil moisture combined with moisture in the vegetation and high humidity during the burn often results in thatch remaining after a burn.

A major consideration when conducting any prescribed fire is to understand how the area will be managed prior to and after the burn. If an area is needed for livestock grazing soon after the fire, fall burning might not be the best time to burn, especially when there is not adequate soil moisture. There is a very short window of the growing season left to regrow enough grass for livestock forage. However, if the area can be rested until the next growing season, the forage will be higher in quality.

This article is not to add confusion about selecting a time of year to conduct prescribed burns. Instead, it is to liberate fire practitioners to think beyond typical calendar restraints. Apply fire to the landscape and monitor the plant community response. Any time of the year is a good time to burn, and fall might be the best time for you.