

# Wildlife Food Plots

## Wildlife Food Plots Overview

Establishing food plots for wildlife is not a difficult process and can be done with minimal investment. A basic understanding of the soil, the wildlife species you wish to attract, and wildlife food preferences will help make your food plots successful. When done properly, food plots can provide opportunities to view wildlife or develop a healthier wildlife population. Establishing food plots can also be a great activity for a family or members of a conservation organization or hunt club. A food plot is your opportunity to give back something to the deer herd which you intend to take something from. This should be your primary reason for planting a food plot if you are a serious hunter and outdoorsman. Food plots give you the opportunity to become involved in your deer herd management and you will have a different appreciation and satisfaction when you harvest a deer or two from your herd. If you are interested in being involved in game management then read on so you can begin to understand why food plots are more than just attracting deer.

## Goals of the Food Plot

Before investing labor, time, and money ask yourself why you want to establish food plots. Do you hope to increase the health and quality of the animals on your property? Do you simply want to increase your chances of viewing more wildlife? Is there a particular species of wildlife you want to attract?

If you understand more about what is happening in nature and how cruel nature can be to a deer herd then possibly you will have more enthusiasm for planting a food plot. Read on if you want to understand what is happening to food sources in the woods.

Nature can be cruel to your deer herd with drought, flood, cold, snow, and low mast production (acorns). Native food sources are seasonal and the nutrition peak is usually a few weeks at best. Deer are very good at adapting to their environment and can survive and deal with most of what nature throws their way. However, this does not bode well for healthy fawn growth, antler growth and increasing your herd. Peak times of good nutrition for your herd are early spring when everything is budding out in the woods, during this three to four week period a multitude of plants are at peak nutrition. Deer are browsing the tender buds on a multitude of native plants because they know that this will not last very long. These tender buds are easily digested providing the deer much needed nutritional relief from the long winter. However, in a few weeks the budding out phase comes to an end for most plants and leaves and grasses become more fibrous and nutritional value goes down rapidly.

During this budding out phase in early spring is a good time to plant your spring and summer food plot. Deer are going to browse the multitude of native plants they so depend on and will not attack your food plot so much allowing your plantings to get some root structure before the deer begin to browse your plot. If you wait until after this spring budding is over to plant your food plot, deer will attack your plot and possibly destroy your plot before it has the opportunity to grow enough to withstand browsing. Also, remember that bucks are growing their antlers during this time of year and need protein for the antlers to grow any size. The more available protein - the larger the rack. So, if you have a nutritious food plot growing when the spring budding is about over, the bucks never experience a shortage of protein for their antler growth. Your spring & summer food plots are crucial to antler growth and healthy fawns. Fall/winter food plots have nothing to do with antler growth.

The next peak time for native nutrition is fruits and berries which are rich in carbohydrates which your deer will store the extra energy as fat store around the kidney and back fat deposits. The fruit and berry phase also only last a few weeks and during this time your food plots will get a short breather from heavy deer browse. The fruiting season is usually in August and early September. Another time of important native foods is the mast (acorn drop). Acorns provide another rich source of carbohydrate to help store body fat for the coming winter. The acorn drop is a good opportunity to over seed your spring & summer food plot with some winter seed varieties. The deer are not going to visit your food plots as much during the acorn drop. This gives you the opportunity to fertilize your food plots as well as plant your fall winter plots without disturbing your deer's feeding pattern.

All this is in a perfect spring, summer, and fall. If, however, nature throws some wrenches into the gears of this perfect climate then your food plots are all the more important. A drought during the budding phase can limit the amount of available browse and lowers the all important protein phase for antler growth. The shortage of this tender browse limits milk production of the doe and fawns suffer. A drought during the fruit and berry stage has the same effect on the animal's fat reserves. Again, your food plot can make a huge difference during this time. Mast production (acorns) are affected by drought also, however, mast is sometimes bi-annual and produce abundant acorns every other year. This is very detrimental to the health of bucks. Bucks need to store large amounts of body fat for the winter and rut. Bucks feed very little during the month or so of rut and depend on their fat reserves for survival. After rut is over many bucks in the north regions can experience die off during harsh winters if their fat reserves were used up during rut. So, if you have a weak acorn crop your food plots can make a huge difference in your buck survival rate over the winter.

If there is poor native browse, fruit production and low mast production, this is a double whammy for bucks. In nature the males will give up habitat and the food source that goes with it to females caring for young if there is a shortage of food source. This is also true in the deer herd as the bucks will give up prime feeding grounds to the doe with fawns to insure the survival of the species. During these times food plots can make a huge difference in over all herd health and survival. Remember, early browse and native legumes are the only source of protein. Protein grows bones, muscle, hair, hooves, and more importantly to bucks their antlers. So, if you want large bodied bucks with huge racks, your food plots with high protein legumes can make a difference. High energy foods (carbohydrates) such as fruits, nuts and berries are converted into fat stores on your deer. So, it helps to locate some of these sources in

## Selecting the Site

Site selection for food plots is very important and one should consider many factors in selecting sites for food plots.

First we should discuss where not to establish food plots. Avoid areas which can be seen from nearby highways which tempt poaching or shooting from public roads. Avoid areas too close to the hunting lodge or camp grounds which will likely not be used by your deer very often during hunting season. Avoid planting near your right of ways within the hunting track if you will be driving hunters close to their hunting spots. Avoid planting plots within view of other plots.

Now we will discuss good locations for your food plots. The size of your hunting tract determines how many food plots you should consider. Basically 1 or 2 percent of total property should be food plot area if you intend to use these plots to help your herd and utilize them for hunting. So, every hundred acres should have a one or two acre food plot. These can be natural clearings in the woods or open areas near ponds or creeks. Try and find a secluded location with low natural vegetation, with adequate moisture and sunlight for at least half the day. Remember each group of deer have their own feeding range and they don't venture far from this area &ndash; usually about one hundred acres for six to eight doe. Bucks may move within several different doe home ranges during rut. So, hopefully you can identify the various home ranges and plant a food plot within each home range. Many state game and fish departments will do a deer survey of your hunting tract and give you a report. These reports usually identify different home ranges with the approximate number of deer inhabiting the range. Determine the size of the plot you want to establish &ndash; 207'&times; 207' is one square acre. Of course the plot does not have to be square &ndash; they can be any shape you desire or any natural opening. If you intend to farm these plots (cultivate them with tractors and harrows) then accessibility with farm equipment plays a role in selecting the area for your plots. If you intend to no-till some areas then those areas can be more secluded. Do not think you have to clear the entire opening to plant your plot, you should leave a lot of the natural cover scattered around your plot such as briars, clumps of trees, palmetto, and just plant around these which will provide some security to your deer. When using a no-till method don't be concerned about natural vegetation or native weeds. Many of these grasses and weeds are native foods to your deer and when you inter-seed them with your food plot species and fertilize the area you will find the deer browsing the native species too. The plot doesn't have to be pretty; it needs to be effective by attracting deer and turkeys.

## Sizing the Plot

Many hunt clubs make a huge mistake by planting one or two food plots five to ten acres in size. They then surround these huge plots with deer stands or tree climbers. Hunting success drops dramatically with this type food plot system.

First of all deer will only use these five to ten acre food plots after dark. Very seldom (especially during hunting season) will you find deer browsing out in the middle of large open food plots. They may feed around the edges of these large food plots early morning hours or late evening just before dark. Guess what, early morning and late afternoons are when your club members are going to their deer stands. It doesn't take long for the deer to pattern your hunting behavior and simply avoid these huge food plots except during the night.

Basically, food plots done right are multiple one acre plots spread though out your hunting track. There are several good reasons for many small food plots as opposed to the few large plots. Deer are browsers as we have discussed previously, browsers move and don't spend all day in one place. No matter how good a food plot you have deer are not going to spend the day there. The deer will move constantly during their feeding time and browse in a lot of areas. The more different places you have for deer to stop and browse the more of your deer herd you will observe when hunting or watching.

Bucks do not feed a lot during rut, but they will keep watch on their doe herd. The doe with her yearlings will visit these various food plots different times of the day to browse and the bucks trail along to keep an eye on these girls. So, there again by having multiple small food plots you increase your odds of seeing a buck moving around during the daytime hours.

Spreading out your hunters to various food plots helps in many ways. The noisy hunter in your club doesn't scare away all the deer from the one big food plot. He may scare away the deer from the one small plot he was assigned to, but this may help the quiet hunters stationed in other nearby food plots. Just easing through the woods hunters going to various food plots will cause deer to slip away from seeing a moving hunter which increases the odds of other hunters seeing deer movement. Also, having many small food plots spread out though out your hunting track spreads out your hunters giving them their own space.

#### What and When to Plant

Two factors will help determine which crops to plant in your food plot. The first is your goal(s) for the project. Wildlife species differ in the plants that they prefer. The second is the landscape around the proposed site. If acres and acres of corn and soybeans surround you, planting more of the same probably will not attract wildlife to your property. However, if there are none of these fields in your area, you may be able to attract wildlife that uses these crops.

Hancock Seed Company has over 35 years experience growing, harvesting, processing food plot plant species. Over the years we have determined that there is no one single forage specie which can provide a completely balanced nutritional diet. Deer do not graze like cattle. Deer consume small quantities of a multitude of plant species to accomplish a balanced diet. Therefore, planting one species of forage insures that you will have a food plot visited only occasionally by deer for a very short period of time. By planting a mixture of several different forage species you insure that your food plot will attract more deer, more often, for longer periods of time. The more different species in your food plot the closer you get to a balanced diet for your deer herd. The salad bar effect as we like to call it is the only way to go. If you are going to go to the extra effort to help your deer herd with a food plot it is simply foolish to plant "one- single forage specie". Plant mixtures so you accomplish the "Salad Bar Effect".

When selecting various species of plants choose plants for soil type, drought tolerance, wet tolerance, fast growing, browse tolerance etc. In other words pick different species for different weather conditions. Select a few species which are more drought tolerant, a few which are wet tolerant, one or two which are fast growing to help protect the slower growing species from overgrazing. These various selections help assure your food plot continues to produce forage during adverse conditions such as drought, excessive rainfall, heavy deer pressure etc. So, by planting mixtures you insure that most likely something will be growing well in the different weather conditions.

There is no specie that can grow year around providing all the nutrition a deer needs. All plant species have certain

periods of maximum available nutrition and this varies from plant to plant, so the more different species you have growing in your food plot the chances are you will always have something providing optimum nutrition throughout the season. Also, remember all deer species are browsers by nature and are interested in a variety of plants. By planting mixtures you stimulate your deer's interest in the variety of species in your food plot. The deer will come more often and stay longer in your food plot browsing all these different plant species.

Another benefit of planting combinations of plant species is to help determine what species grow the best in your food plot area. You may determine the first year that some species just do not do well and others thrive in your food plot. Using this information you will plant more of the successful species the next year and little or none of the less successful species. Become your own food plot expert as it pertains to your food plots.

Once you know what to plant, you must determine the best time to plant your crop. Different seed varieties will thrive at different times of the year. It is important that you prepare the plot site to ensure that you are able to plant your seeds under the appropriate conditions.

### Equipment and Planting Methods

Many food plots can be established with a minimum investment in equipment. A small tractor, disk, and corn planter or grain drill will often do the job. If you own an ATV, there are several manufacturers of seeders, fertilizer spreaders, and other attachments designed specifically for use with an ATV.

For small areas, once the area has been prepared, planting the seeds by hand can be done successfully. Many soil and water conservation districts have seeding equipment for rent on a per-acre basis. In some cases, local farmers can be hired to complete the tillage and planting.

### No-Till Food Plots

Hancock Seed Company the originators of the no-till food plot concept began providing no-till food plot mixtures for hunt clubs in 1980. Over the years we have perfected many different mixtures of premium seeds which can be no-till planted for food plots.

No-till planting is just what the name implies. Seeds are broadcast over existing vegetation without disturbing the soil. This method eliminates the need to bring machinery to remote areas to cultivate the soil for the traditional planting method. Another advantage of no-till is the transition from a summer food plot to a fall winter food plot can be accomplished without disturbing the existing summer food plot. By simply over seeding the summer food plot in with the cool season seeds and allowing the deer to actually help press these seeds into your existing food plot you have extended your food plot for several more months without tillage.

No-till seeds are generally very small seed types that are not easily found by birds, turkeys and other wildlife until after germination. Large seeds such as corn, peas, sunflowers etc. are not well suited for no-till as they can be consumed by wildlife before germination. However, clovers, millets, greens, etc. are very small and are suitable for no-till planting.

With no-till planting you are able to establish many small food plots in very remote areas and increase your buck harvest potential. Select areas with low vegetation, adequate moisture, and sunlight. Partially shaded areas receiving at least four hours of sunlight per day is sufficient. The reason for selecting areas with low vegetation is because emerging seedlings need sunlight energy to grow. If these little plants emerge in deep grass they can't receive the needed sunlight for survival and usually will die. If you no-till your seeds into grasses, do so in early spring before the grasses begin actively growing. This will allow your no-till seeds to germinate begin growing and keep their heads above the grasses so to speak. Many no-till plants grow very successfully intermixed with native grasses. When you lime and fertilize your no-till plants you are also doing so to the native plants which many times are beneficial to wildlife as forage.

## Traditional Tilled Food Plots

In areas where you can get necessary farm equipment to cultivate the soil and prepare a seed bed one can plant a variety of seed types. Tilling the soil destroys the existing vegetation and loosens the soil so the food plot seeds have little or no competition for available nutrients and moisture.

When planting the traditional way be careful to not cover the seed too deep. Spread your lime, fertilizer, and seed before you go back over the field to cover the seed. This reduces the possibility of covering your seed too deep. If the cultivated field is very soft you would be wise to just drag a bushy limb over the field to cover the seed rather than use a cultivator to incorporate the seed and fertilizer. If you have a successful summer food plot deer are using when it is time to plant your fall/winter food plot you might consider using the no-till method to spread these winter seeds into your existing food plot. This way the deer will help press the seeds into the ground while still browsing the summer plants. Also, if you were to plow up your summer plot and plant the winter seeds you have disrupted the deer feeding pattern and they will move on to other areas to feed. They may possibly come back after the fall crop begins growing unless they have found something better while waiting for your next crop.

There are some disadvantages to traditional tilled plots besides the need of farm equipment. One is that plowing up soil sets you up for soil erosion from wind or water. A heavy rain shortly after planting could possibly wash your seeds down a hill if there is a slope. Breaking up the sod allows moisture to escape and could be detrimental to your seedlings if you don't get a rain shortly after planting. Sometimes plowing up an area you expose undesirable weed seeds to the top of the soil and they will germinate and possibly compete with your food plot species.

## Food Plot Success

You can have a successful food plot using either of these methods. Of course even professional farmers have crop failures. Drought, flood, insects, disease, feral pigs, over grazing, are all possible causes of a failed food plot. However, by planting several small food plots as opposed to one or two large food plots you increase your odds of having a successful food plot experience. Also, do not think you have to have a beautiful weed free food plot. You are not farming the crop for a profit you are growing this for wildlife. Your wildlife could care less what it looks like they are more interested in the nutrition. Also, remember many native weed species are very beneficial to wildlife and you will be surprised how many of these native plants will be a favorite of the wildlife especially since they have been fertilized.

## Common Food Plot Mistakes

Here are some common mistakes made by people establishing food plots:

More is better - Exceeding the seeding, lime, or fertilizer recommendation is a waste of both time and money and, in the case of lime and fertilizer, too much may negatively affect the crop. The 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. Do a 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.

Not planting enough acres. Food plots that are too small are ineffective. Food plots can be any size, but should be at least 1,000 square feet. Food plots of 1/4 to 1/2 acre in size for every 20 acres are a good rule of thumb. 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.