Why Plant Food Plots?

Why Plant Food Plots? Many if not most hunters plant food plots primarily as a deer attractant to hunt over. This should be a benefit of planting a food plot but not the reason for the planting. A food plot accomplishes several things if done properly. 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. You become involved in game management when you look at food plots as an opportunity to produce more fawns, increase body size, prevent die off from poor nutrition, and of course help bucks achieve huge racks. When you become seriously involved in your herd management you will have a different appreciation and satisfaction when your harvest a deer or two from your herd. You helped this herd produce the quality animals you harvest. 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 to hunt.

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. Peek 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.

The next peek 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 your deer habitat and fertilize them in the spring and fall when liming and fertilizing your food plots.

The next issue to discuss a little is controlling herd numbers and ratio of buck to doe. Many hunt clubs are opposed to harvesting doe under any circumstances. They believe the more doe they have the more bucks they will have. Unfortunately, this is not the case, in fact if the doe to buck ratio gets too far out of whack you have the opposite – fewer bucks and smaller racks. Ideally, two or three doe for each buck is what you need to sustain a healthy deer herd with the opportunity to grow some monster rack bucks. The wildlife biologist with you state game and fish departments can do a survey of your deer herd and advise you on your doe to buck ratio. In many states this is the only way to get doe tags. Amazingly, some hunt clubs have been issued forty or fifty doe tags after a deer herd survey was completed. A few years after their doe harvest, they began to harvest more bucks with larger racks. So, have a survey conducted by a wildlife biologist to determine your doe to buck ratio. Harvest doe at the number they recommend and you will see amazing results in your buck harvest and rack size. By doing all the things above you are taking control of the management of your deer herd. You are giving back something and not just taking from.

Written By:

Rchard Hancock

CEO & President

Hancock Seed Company