

A man wearing a blue short-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and an orange hat is crouching in a field of lush green plants. The background shows a dense line of trees under a clear blue sky. The text "10 WAYS TO GET MORE BENEFITS OUT OF YOUR FOOD PLOTS" is overlaid in large white letters on the left side of the image.

# 10 WAYS TO GET MORE BENEFITS OUT OF YOUR FOOD PLOTS



## Years of food plotting experience have helped the author glean tips that optimize Whitetail Institute food plots.

Try these tactics on your property.

■ Text and Photo by *Gerald Almy*

**T**he goal of most Whitetail News readers is to grow the best food plots possible. That's an unwritten assumption. We do this because we enjoy seeing and hunting deer and want to ensure that our land offers the best forage to support quality animals. We also grow plots to increase our edge for harvesting deer — particularly mature bucks — by offering nutritious forage with strong taste appeal that meets the varying nutrition needs of deer during all seasons.

But there's another reason we grow food plots. It's an immensely fulfilling and life-enriching activity. I've met many deer managers who rate growing plots as being almost more fun than hunting. And unlike hunting, which lasts a few months, growing food plots is a year-round activity that always gives us a reason to be afield, where we're most happy.

Whatever your reasons for growing forage for deer, you'll likely agree that you want to have plots that grow tall, last long, rate highest in protein and nutritional value, and attract the most mature bucks. You've started well by choosing the leader among wildlife seed companies: the Whitetail Institute. But you can take other steps to increase the benefits you and deer receive from your plots.

My introduction to food plotting began about the same time Ray Scott unveiled his groundbreaking Imperial Whitetail Clover in the late 1980s. Since then, I've set annual goals to grow better plots than the previous year and increase their benefits for deer. I don't always succeed, but I try. Here are a few steps I take to enhance the attractiveness of my plots and entice deer to stay on my land in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley.

### 1) KEEP IT VARIED

When I got into food plotting, I was a fan of Imperial Whitetail Clover, which had just come out. I planted it in every open spot of land, and deer loved it. It's

perhaps the best deer forage ever created. But as the Whitetail Institute expanded its offerings, I gradually increased the variety of plants I used. First came Winter-Greens, soon followed by Tall Tine Tubers and then Whitetail Oats. All paid off, because deer loved those mixtures, too. During some periods, they even preferred them to my clover plots.

No individual forage is enough to keep deer on your property year-round. That's why the Whitetail Institute has a variety of offerings, most of which are blends of several plants. Take advantage, and offer products to suit the needs of deer and their taste preferences during different seasons. Give deer Ravish Radish in fall, and blends such as Winter Peas Plus, Destination and Beets & Greens. Give them Chic Magnet, Alfa-Rack Plus and Power Plant for summer forages, or use Extreme for poor soil areas. Any food plotter who uses only a few forages is missing an opportunity to offer deer the taste and nutritional variety they want and the ability to supply them with forage all year.

I've seen some whitetails feed on one forage while another group makes a bee-line to another type of food in a nearby plot. Deer are a lot like people: Some like chicken, and some like steak. The more varied your offerings, the more likely you'll always have some forages that are at peak production and palatability, as well as various offerings that appeal to the tastebuds of individual deer.

### 2) SUBDIVIDE LARGE FIELDS

Most small to medium-sized plots do well with one forage. But with larger fields, I've found offering two or three forages in sections will attract more deer. Instead of having to travel to other fields, a buck can eat a bite of clover, then nip on Winter Greens and move to a snack of Whitetail Oats without having to travel to another field. Deer that prefer one or all those offerings can find it in one field.

During rifle hunts, I can cover those separate sections and get a shot opportunity at whichever forage a buck prefers. One memorable day, I watched three mature bucks in one of my subdivided fields, each eating a different forage. (Although the one I shot that day wasn't eating but watching a doe eat clover and trying to get her attention.)

Mix up your offerings, planting strips or blocks of various foods however the contour and shape of the field dictates. I believe the edge effect of the various heights and density of the plants abutting each other also makes the plot more appealing to mature deer than one large field planted with one even-height forage.

### 3) CUT CLOVER

Cut clover in strips or blocks at various times so a field has varied growth stages available. If you've watched a clover field, you'll notice deer hammer it in early spring, when there's little other natural forage available, and the clover is tender, young and packed with protein. In time, though, feeding might slack off. The way to overcome this is to mow the forage and encourage new succulent growth. Cutting also reduces weed competition, encourages stolon, or "runner root," development, and reduces blossoming.

To keep deer coming to your clover fields even more consistently, cut the field in staggered sections or strips at various times, usually about a week apart. Mow one section, and then cut another a week later so there's always part of the plot at the perfect stage for maximum palatability and protein content. That also increases the edge effect by having various heights of clover in different sections.

### 4) TREAT CLOVER WITH ARREST MAX AND SLAY EARLY

The best time to apply herbicides to perennial fields is early in the season, when weeds and grasses are young. Cutting

the tops of weeds when you mow clover will reduce their abundance and keep the plants from reproducing and spreading. However, you'll never totally stop weed and grass competition with clover in most cases unless you spray with selective herbicides. The Whitetail Institute has the answer, with Arrest Max, for grasses, and Slay, for controlling various broadleaf weeds and other forage competitors.

The trick to getting the most from those products is to apply them when weeds and grasses are young, when they are most vulnerable. That often means late spring, but another application might be necessary later in summer, as new competing vegetation emerges. And remember to always use Sure-Fire surfactant.

### 5) PLANT STRIPS OF CONCEAL FOR TWO STRATEGIC REASONS

This new mixture of tall-growing stemmy forages from Whitetail Institute serves several purposes, two of them crucial. One of the most important benefits of Conceal on my property is to provide a shield or barrier that I can stay behind to sneak undetected into a blind or tree stand. Plant

rows of this 6- to 10-foot-tall plant you can walk behind while moving into the wind to reach stands from your camp or vehicle without being seen or scented.

A second major use of Conceal is to calm deer as they approach a plot. Plant strips that lead from the direction of buck bedding areas toward the edge of and right into the plot. The cover gives bucks a feeling of security as they approach, encouraging mature animals to enter the plot during legal shooting hours.

That dual use means you'll have strips or rows of Conceal on two sides of the plot — the side deer use as they approach the forage, and the opposite side, where you walk to your stand.

### 6) KNOW WHEN TO GIVE UP ON A PERENNIAL PLOT

The plants in Whitetail Institute perennial plots were created for deer and to help hunters. Longevity is a critical component, as it's ideal to make plots last as long as possible. That's typically three years but at times up to five.

When you have a reliable Imperial Whitetail Clover or Alfa-Rack plot that usually produces a good buck, it's hard

to admit its time is up. But eventually, the plot's production will decline, and weed competition will increase to the point that it's best to throw in the towel and convert the plot to a new product. Pull a few plants up to check the roots and see if they look healthy or if they're struggling. Also, look for possible insect damage, and consider whether the plot's overall production is declining.

I find it easier to call it quits on a perennial plot because I know the spot will likely produce a good annual, perhaps with Ravish or Winter Greens, because of the extra nitrogen the clover or alfalfa has left in the soil. I also know that taking a break from clover or alfalfa and planting an annual will reduce weeds and improve the compacted soil, because of the brassicas' deep-drilling roots and by producing weed-inhibiting glucosinolates, which are biologically active compounds in plants in the brassica family.

If a plot is perfect for Alfa-Rack or Imperial Whitetail Clover, I can replant it in a year or two with those perennials after briefly switching to annuals. When the new perennial crop comes up, it will be

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younger, hardier and more appealing, with fewer competing weeds and grasses because of the help the annual provided the soil. Crop rotation will improve soil health.

### 7) ADD NITROGEN TO BRASSICA PLOTS 30 TO 45 DAYS AFTER THEY EMERGE

Add a fertilizer such as 46-0-0 or something similar. Brassica blends such as Tall Tine Tubers and Ravish Radish benefit from an extra dose of nitrogen.

Many deer managers skip this step because it's often needed during hunting season. But if you apply it at midday, odds are you won't spoil the hunting at that plot for more than one afternoon. And after the plot sees a surge in growth and renewed vigor, with a rich, deep green color, chances are it will produce better hunting. Deer sense when a forage offers the greatest benefits and will flock to the newly enhanced plot.

### 8) PLANT RAVISH RADISH TO IMPROVE THE SOIL FOR FUTURE PLANTINGS OF OTHER FORAGES

This blend from the Whitetail Institute is extremely attractive to deer and benefits their health, and it also improves the soil.

The taproots of these plants grow deep, excavating large holes in the soil that break up compaction (hardpan). This allows additional moisture and air into the soil column. When the root dies, the holes it leaves let new plants dig deeper and obtain moisture and nutrients from lower levels in the soil column. These plants grow aggressively, so they also choke out competing weeds and release glucosinolates, which further inhibit weed growth. The final benefit Ravish Radish provides is its ability to bring up phosphorus from deep levels and leave it higher in the soil for future crops.

### 9) ROTATE CROPS

If one plot site does well with a specific plant, it's tempting to put the same forage there every year. That's a mistake — one I've made more than once. Diseases and harmful insects increase if a plot is sown with the same plant year after year. Brassicas are particularly vulnerable to these problems if you plant them more than two consecutive times at a site.

Changing what you plant in a plot also lets you obtain benefits from the previous

planting. After growing Power Plant, for example, there will be extra nitrogen in the soil from the legumes that will help a Winter Greens or Whitetail Oats plot grow better and reduce fertilizer costs.

### 10) FOLLOW PLANTING INSTRUCTIONS

This is a simple step but one of the most important to get the most benefits from your food plot. The Whitetail Institute tests every variation in planting times, locations and seed depth for every blend. And it does that for each region of the country.

To get the best tasting, most nutritious forage, first do a soil test, and then follow site preparation and planting instructions precisely. Take care to prepare the soil, and plant exactly when and how the instructions specify. Cutting corners or ignoring carefully formulated advice on the bag is a recipe for poor results.



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