



■ A deer manager should never have to complain about too much free time or being bored. Slip on a pair of work boots, grab some gloves and get busy on a project.

12 PROJECTS TO HELP WHITETAILS

You can always do something to improve your property. Try these suggestions to get your hands dirty, help deer and boost hunting success.

■ by *Gerald Almy*

For deer managers, taking care of and improving our properties is a labor of love — an all-consuming hobby and a passion that runs deep. You'll probably identify so many projects to enhance deer habitat that time is the only constraint.

Between family, work and social obligations, it's sometimes difficult to carve out hours to devote to deer properties. But we must squeeze out that time — for the deer, the land and the sense of fulfillment that comes from each improvement to the woods and fields.

Most food plotters are happiest when doing something to enhance the land, whether it's removing noxious weeds, creating a water source or planting a food plot. We're never really caught up.

It's a continuous process. When you have a few hours or a spare day off, here are 12 projects you can undertake to improve the land, the deer and your hunting success.

Although some of these and similar projects might seem small and somewhat insignificant, improving a property for deer and other wildlife occurs one step at a time, one goal at a time. Some might take an hour, others a few days. Some might be continuing and never conclude. But a wildlife manager should never lack for something productive to tackle, whether you own the land or lease it. Here's another reward I've experienced by tackling these tasks: The more you undertake and complete, the more mature bucks will want to call your property their year-round home.



“

“WATER SOURCES CAN MEAN ANYTHING FROM A \$5,000 POND BUILT BY A CONTRACTOR TO A DAM ON A SMALL CREEK YOU MAKE WITH A FEW HOURS OF HAND LABOR.”

REPLENISH OR CREATE NEW MINERAL LICKS

Deer cannot obtain the quantity or variety of minerals and vitamins they need from a regular diet of natural browse, food plots and agricultural fields. Fix that by creating mineral licks or reactivating ones you already have. (Always check state regulations to make sure putting out minerals is legal.) If you don't offer deer vitamins and minerals, chances are they will head to a neighboring property that has them.

Bucks can store phosphorous and calcium they obtain from Imperial Whitetail 30-06 in their skeletal system and then use it for antler growth during summer. The Whitetail Institute's mineral vitamin mixtures were developed for the needs of deer, not cattle, sheep or hogs.

I like to create one lick for every 40 to 50 acres, placing them near heavy cover to encourage mature buck use. Make

sure you locate them in well-drained areas that won't get saturated and hold water after a rain, letting minerals leach out.

Break up the ground with a shovel, and mix in 20 to 40 pounds. Work the minerals approximately 6 inches deep into the soil. If you already have licks, pour on about half that amount, and mix it into the dirt with a shovel or hoe. If a lick has been hit hard and is severely depleted, add the full 20 to 40 pounds to rejuvenate it.

BUILD A WATER SOURCE

Bucks might love your food plots, but if you don't have a water source, they'll likely travel to your neighbor's land to find one. Water sources can mean anything from a \$5,000 pond built by a contractor to a dam on a small creek you made with a few hours of hand labor.

I've built several small water sources

from livestock feeding bins and children's pools by digging the ground out and back-filling around the edges. You can also dig down until you hit clay and let rain fill the hole, or place pond liner material in it. An even simpler way to provide water year-round is to use rocks and logs to create a dam on a wet-weather stream that would otherwise run dry in summer. Cost: a bit of elbow grease.

PLANT A VEGETATION BARRIER TO BLOCK THE VIEW OF YOUR PLOTS

A barrier can hide your plots from roads and neighbors. You can use white pines, native warm-season grasses or a faster-growing product such as Conceal to create a shield that blocks the view of your plots. These screens also serve double duty by making deer using the plot feel more secure and encouraging them to enter it earlier in daylight.

SET ASIDE A SANCTUARY

An area where no hunting or human activities are allowed will go a long way toward making mature bucks use your land all year. The more thick, rough, swampy, briar-infested or steep it is, the better. The only time you should enter it is to retrieve a wounded deer. Map out the best sanctuary by using a topo map with satellite photo study, along with your knowledge of where the thickest, most rugged areas are.

If other hunters use the property, place paint marks or ribbons to delineate its borders. Sanctuaries are only as good as the lack of pressure they receive. Make sure everyone using the property respects them.

DAYLIGHT WOODS PLOTS

When you plant small kill plots in forested habitat, you probably cut back tree branches surrounding them and even fell a few trees to open the area to sunlight. But through time, those will grow back and shade the plot, reducing forage production. Cut back overhanging branches to allow at least four hours of sunlight to reach the plot each day.

OVERSEED BARE SPOTS IN PLOTS

Before weeds get a chance to fill in bare spots in a freshly planted plot, go back after the forage emerges and reseed areas your spreader missed. Take this step as soon as your plots emerge and get a few inches tall. Often, you'll find the areas near the edges have some gaps and a light crop, or maybe where the tractor and spreader made a tight turn. If you don't reseed those spots, weeds will fill them for you. When that happens, the forage will have to compete with unwanted vegetation for moisture and nutrients in the soil, reducing its potential to nurture quality deer.

CLEAR A NEW SPOT FOR A FOOD PLOT

Use chainsaws, bush hogs, weed eaters, glyphosate, tillers or whatever it takes to get a raw piece of ground ready for planting. When rocks and branches are removed and weeds have been eliminated, you'll have the site ready to create another food plot. You can take it a step farther by doing a soil test, amending the dirt with the necessary fertilizers

and lime, and then tilling the site several times to get a smooth firm seedbed.

IMPROVE NATIVE FORAGE

Deer will never feed exclusively in food plots for all their nutrition needs. That means you should enhance and protect important natural foods on your property. Everyone's land will have different native browse, but some species are common throughout large parts of the country and beneficial to deer. Protect or enhance these natural foods, such as greenbrier, blackberry, grape, plum, honeysuckle and various other edible shrubs. Fertilizing these native plant species will improve forage quality and produce more foliage.

CLEAR OUT LOW-VALUE TREES

Low-value trees and branches often shade high-quality foods. Clearing them lets more daylight reach a plot. Fertilizing can help increase their production, doubling the protein they offer in certain cases. And if some of those vines are 10 feet high, pull them down lower where deer can reach them.

Some trees, such as red maple, provide little food for whitetails when they're tall. But if you cut them down or hinge-cut them, myriad shoots will sprout at the cut, providing valuable forage. Make sure you cut them about 2 to 4 feet high to make the new browse accessible to deer.

FEATHER A BORDER BETWEEN WOODS AND FIELDS

Deer don't like to step straight out from mature woods into an open field. Give them a sense of security and extra browse by hinge-cutting some low-value trees along the border. Also, plant a few shrubs, such as blackberry, chinquapin, Chickasaw plum or red osier dogwood, which offer food and cover.

CREATE A THERMAL REFUGE

When the wind blows hard from the north, and snow and ice pelt open stands of hardwoods, deer will flock to a thermal refuge. Take time to create one so it's ready when they need it during the heart of winter. The size can be one-half to several acres. Locate it near the center of your land.

If you're lucky, the property might already have natural stands of young fir, pine, spruce or cedar that offer deer shelter from the wind and hold air that's usually several degrees warmer than in an open hardwood forest. If you don't have such areas, it's time to plant at least a quarter-acre. White pines are my favorite, but other species also work well.

Evergreen trees also offer great escape areas during gun seasons and a sense of seclusion and security to mature bucks. Besides planting the conifers, cut down a few deciduous trees or scrub cedars to provide extra wind-breaks and structure near which deer can bed. A downed tree makes a perfect spot for a buck to bed next to, especially when surrounded by thick young evergreen growth.

SPRUCE UP SMALL KILL PLOTS

If leaves fall on your woodland kill plots before the seed germinates or right after on the seedlings, use a leaf blower to remove them. Or use a quieter rake if the plot is near buck bedding cover. Fallen leaves can smother seedlings. Also, pick up rocks and sticks, which can reduce plot output and damage equipment the next time you work the ground. Bring a bag of seed, and add to any bare spots you discover after you blow off the leaves.

RELEASE FRUIT TREES AND YOUR BEST OAKS FROM COMPETING TREES

Cut down competing trees inside the crown line of your best acorn producers, and pear, apple, crabapple and persimmon trees. Removing competing trees is beneficial, letting remaining trees obtain more nutrients and moisture from the soil.

CONCLUSION

Those are just a few of many small projects you can do to improve your deer property. One thing I know is certain: A deer manager should never have to complain about too much free time or being bored. Slip on some work boots, grab a pair of rugged gloves and have at it.

After I finish this article, that's exactly what I plan to do.

