

by Gerald Almy

FLUB UPS TO AVOID

The author has decades of trial-and-error experience in growing top-quality food plots. Here, he details several critical errors he made during his journey — and how you can avoid them.

PHOTO BY GERALD ALMY

When I became interested in growing food plots years ago, there was little information on equipment, soil preparation, fertilizer needs, what plants would be best for deer, the taste preferences of deer and the best place to locate plots — basically everything.

That was long ago. Things have changed — dramatically. Food plotters now have so much information in books, online and in magazines such as *Whitetail News* that any question, whether beginner's issues or more in-depth problems, has an answer. Soil analysis questions, top crop rotation strategies, the best tools for breaking ground, which plants deer digest best — the answers are there, free. Even with that near-overload of information, though, it's not uncommon for food plotters to encounter problems and

make mistakes as they delve deeper into this activity, which soon becomes an all-encompassing passion for many.

It's natural to make wrong turns, flub things up and experience failures, often many times, before you become a pro at growing consistently top-notch food plots. In a way, that might be good, because lessons learned from dirt-in-the-fingernails experience — failing, realizing your mistake and then improving the next time — are indelibly etched in our minds.

I know that from experience. If there's a food plot mistake, I've been there, done that. Learning was a process of trial and error, and I was particularly proficient at the error part of the equation — sometimes several times over. That's why I feel qualified to write this piece. But gradually, I learned from those mistakes.

Now, unless I'm trying a new project, I can usually get the results I want on the first attempt because of years of trial-and-error learning before the turn of the century.

I remember some of my first years, when I would make three or four mistakes when planning, planting and maintaining a plot. And I'd pay for it — a poor crop, overrun with weeds and barely offering palatable fare for deer. Fortunately, there were so few people growing food plots then that mine still attracted some deer, including a nice buck or two during those early years. And it was a tremendous boost when I learned about Imperial Whitetail Clover soon after it was unveiled.

Besides not killing weeds and grasses properly, guessing about how much lime or fertilizer I needed and planting the wrong type of plant for the type of soil I had, I made other mistakes. Sometimes, I would put the plant in before or after the best window of opportunity. The result was compromised survival of the planting.

To top it off, I put several plots in areas deer would never feel comfortable using except at night. And that's exactly when they did. I knew by the browsed forage and hoof prints. But rarely did I see a deer in daylight at those poorly located early plots.

And if you really want an example of a pointless, hardheaded mistake, I sometimes got a soil test done and then failed to carefully follow the guidelines by adding enough lime and the proper fertilizer. Guess what? Again, I paid for it.

But eventually, the lessons sank in. To save others the wasted money, time and sweat, not to mention the disappointment when a crop fails or is of mediocre quality, here's a guide to avoiding five of the most common food plot mistakes. We'll cover why folks tend to make those mistakes, the consequences and, most important, how to avoid them. Sure, there are others. In drawing up the notes for this article, I came up with more than a dozen. But these five are some of the most common flub-ups and the most crucial to avoid.

1. NOT GETTING A SOIL TEST

It's common for newcomers or people with limited time to want to get to the nitty gritty of tilling the soil, spreading seed and watching plants come up. But it's a huge mistake to jump in without first finding out about your soil. You need to know the

soil's strengths, what nutrients it lacks and its pH. Only after you learn those things can you amend the dirt to ensure it nurtures a quality crop, whether it's clover, brassicas, cereal grains or warm-season annuals.

Sure, it's tempting to throw some 19-19-19 fertilizer and a bit of lime on the soil. But that's not the way to go. Each area where you plan to plant has different soil composition. And almost all plots need some help to grow a high-quality crop of deer forage. A soil test will tell you what nutrients the ground lacks and how acidic or alkaline it is. Be sure to take several samples — eight to 13 — from various areas in the plot, and then mix them together for an accurate sampling of each field.

The pH reading reveals whether lime is required. A reading of less than 6 will require the application of ag lime to increase the pH. Except with a few special-purpose seed mixtures such as Extreme, No-Plow or Secret Spot, the minimum pH you should shoot for is 6.5. The ideal pH for most forage crops is 6.5 to 7.0.

I mention pH for many reasons. First, weeds thrive in acidic soils. With a low pH, crops will grow poorly, and weeds will flourish — a double whammy. A pH that's too low can also cause other problems. It lets nutrients such as phosphorous and potassium become electrochemically bound with other particles in the soil and unavailable to the plants you're growing. That basically means you're pouring money down the drain by adding fertilizer without a balanced pH.

A second crucial piece of information soil tests provide is what type of fertilizers the soil needs. They tell you in simple terms exactly how much nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P) and potassium (K) your soil needs for the specific type of plant you intend to grow.

Soil tests are available at a low cost from the Whitetail Institute, agriculture universities or farm co-ops.

2. NOT FOLLOWING ADVICE FROM THE TEST

This one seems hard to believe. Why bother getting a soil test if you don't follow the advice? I've seen plenty of food plotters look at the results briefly, put them aside and forget about them. Call it procrastination, forgetfulness or laziness. Don't use those excuses.

First, address the lime issue, because a plot that doesn't have the proper pH can't make use of the fertilizers you add. Local farm co-ops or fertilizer companies can spread it for you. Or you can rent a spreader. For small plots, you can buy bags and spread it by hand. Pelletized lime can be spread with a tractor or ATV spreader. After it's applied, lightly disk it into the top few inches of the soil.

Add the amounts of fertilizer recommended by the tests. Each plot should have a sample sent in for testing, because the soil from various plots is never exactly alike. Finally, don't add more fertilizer than the tests recommend. You're wasting money. You can lightly disk fertilizer and lime into soil at the same time. If possible, though, it's best to disk in your lime several months before planting and wait to add fertilizer until just before planting.

3. NOT MATCHING THE SEED OR PLANT TYPE TO THE SOIL VARIETY

There's no excuse for making this mistake if you study the products offered by the Whitetail Institute. The company has a seed mixture for every scenario — from shaded, deep-woods plots, to areas with poor soil to rich bottomlands and dry uplands.

If you've experienced success with Imperial Whitetail Clover, it might be tempting to put that in all your plots. That's a mistake, unless they're the same in terms of soil type. And that's rarely the case. I made that mistake during my early food plotting years and soon learned that other products, such as Extreme or Chic Magnet, would be better in some poorer-quality soils, or that Alfa-Rack Plus was better for drier upland locations. It's also best to use annual and perennial forages.

Whitetail Institute personnel can help you pick the best forage mix for your property and areas where you plan to put in plots. Whitetail Institute consultants have decades of food plot knowledge, and the advice is free. You can also find plenty of helpful information on the company's website. A local county extension agent can also offer advice. And if you want more specific, in-depth advice about your soil types, you can find it at the NRCS website: websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov.

A forage such as Imperial Whitetail Clover does best in clay-type soils that

hold moisture. Its roots are shallow and don't need to penetrate far, using stolons (above-ground roots) to spread and expand growth in bottomlands. Alfa-Rack Plus, however, grows deeper roots and performs best in well-drained soils, such as hills and rolling slopes.

Some plants thrive in dry uplands, but others need moist bottomland. Find out whether your plot's soil is clay, loam or sandy in consistency. If you have poor-quality sandy soil in one plot, Extreme or Pure Attraction are good options. For woods plots that only get a small amount of daylight, offerings such as Secret Spot and Bow-Stand are the best choices, with plants that can thrive in just three to four hours of sunlight and relatively poor soils. Whether you can get equipment in to work the site is another important consideration. Those mixtures will thrive even if you rake the plot up by hand to reveal bare soil and then use a hand spreader.

These choices are covered in the product selector at the company's website. It guides you on how to choose a product best suited to your plot. Click on it, and it

will lead you through several questions to identify several appropriate choices.

"Each of our forage products is designed for certain conditions and factors," said Jon Cooner, a Whitetail Institute seed expert. "Since the combination of all these factors is unique to each plot site, you need to go through the forage selection process for one site at a time and do it in a step-by-step manner.

"Basically, what you do is consider all our forages, run down a list of questions one at a time and remove forages from the list of options as you go through the questions. When you're at the end of the questions, you'll have one or more forages for that site."

That will help you choose several products based on soil type and location and whether you can get equipment to the site. For example, Chic Magnet and Extreme are good for lighter soils that drain well. Imperial Whitetail Clover is better for high-quality soil and bottomland locations you can till before planting. Alfa-Rack Plus or Chic Magnet are the choices for moderate to well-drained sites and flat to

slightly sloping terrain. Clearly, one size fits all does not work in food plotting.

4. NOT PLANTING DURING THE RIGHT WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Just like the best choices of forage for a plot vary, so can the time you should plant that seed blend. I've made this mistake several times, with Whitetail Institute products and years ago when I occasionally used generics.

One of the most glowing examples involves brassica products such as Winter-Greens, Beets & Greens and Tall Tine Tubers. I knew those plants can grow large in good soil, with the right pH and when fertilized properly. Wanting to give them maximum warm-weather time to grow tall, I fudged and planted them several weeks earlier than recommended.

The result was what you would expect. Some of them went to seed, and others wilted in the hot summer sun. The planting dates on the bag have proven best through many years of testing throughout the country. Each time frame is tailored to a specific region.

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You can make that mistake the other direction, too. Planting brassicas too late will not give the plants time to grow to their potential before cold weather slows the growth.

If you plant perennials too late in fall, they won't have time to establish strong roots before heavy frosts. Plant too early and the plants can become stressed from drought and heat. Power Plant needs to go in during a several-week time slot that's early enough to get maximum production but not so early that the soil is cold (colder than 65 degrees), preventing good seed germination.

The Whitetail Institute makes it easy to plant each seed blend during the best time. Follow the directions on the bag, at the company website or in *Whitetail News*, and you won't go wrong. There's usually a two-to-four-week time frame for planting each seed blend for various regions of the country. Just plan a free day during that window of opportunity, and you'll avoid this potentially costly mistake.

5. IGNORING SMALLER POTENTIAL SITES

There's often a tendency to think bigger is better with food plots. A large plot offers

more forage to attract deer and more nutrition to help them grow. And that's a fine philosophy for some plots to make deer like your land and improve their health. It's great for places that are flat and offer easy equipment access, such as meadows or fields not in crop production.

Often, though, small out-of-the-way sites folks overlook can help attract deer to your land and provide superb hunting spots, at the plots themselves or along travel routes leading to them. Study topographical maps and aerial photographs, such as those from Google Earth, and walk every inch of your property with a notebook, pen and map. Jot down potential overlooked areas, and then analyze whether a plot can be grown there. Blends such as No-Plow, Bow-Stand and Secret Spot don't necessarily need to have the soil worked with equipment before planting. Just substitute sweat and some hard hand labor to get those in shape. You won't regret the effort if one of them entices a mature buck to pause within bow or gun range this fall.

Every plot doesn't have to be prize-winning quality. Some of those sites, even if they are just 1/8 or 1/4 acre, can grow reasonably well and are worth planting as

out-of-the-way ambush spots. If you plan to hunt them, consider strategic questions, such as how you can approach the plot, sun and wind direction, and other factors. Consider dirt trails, timbering roads, small natural clearings, small weedy pockets, log landings in woods or corners that have been overlooked.

Of course, you do not want to devote all those to plots. Some thick cover and natural grassy fields are vital to give deer a sense of security.

CONCLUSION

You'll discover many other flub-ups in food plotting. But if you can eliminate these five, you will be off to a good start in growing the most successful plots your land can produce — plots that attract deer to your property, help their nutrition and antler growth, and in some cases provide great hunting sites.



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