



The author often uses a rented mini-excavator to clear small food plots.

FOOD PLOTS PAY DIVIDENDS IN OCTOBER

■ by *Michael Veine*

PHOTO BY MICHAEL VEINE



For three consecutive years, I have been blessed to kill my Michigan limit of two archery bucks during the first week of the season. Why? Smart stands on quality White-tail Institute food plots.

The early part of deer season might be the best time to kill a good buck.

Deer are still using consistent, predictable movement patterns and are often much more relaxed before the escalating pressure of hunting season puts them on edge. In my home state of Michigan, many deer go mostly nocturnal in October instead of moving and feeding during daylight. Also, buck numbers are much higher early in the season.

I have learned to focus on the first week of the archery deer season and in recent years have killed more bucks during that period than at any other time.

COMPETITION AND CROSSBOWS

In the early 1980s, I competed in professional arm wrestling tournaments at a high level, including the World Championships in Petaluma, California. I'm from northern Michigan, but during the early 1980s, I lived out West. When I was growing up, bowhunting was my passion. When I got into arm wrestling, however, I discovered that my bulked-up arms couldn't bend far enough to achieve consistent archery accuracy, so I quit bowhunting for a few years while I lived and competed mostly in the Western states. In the mid-'80s, I moved back to Michigan and had to make a decision: continue arm wrestling or get back into bowhunting. I chose the latter, and for 30 years, I did not think much about arm wrestling.

When Michigan passed a law letting all hunters use cross-

bows during the general archery season, I decided to attempt a comeback in arm wrestling. After a year of training, I went to the National Championships. In three years of competing, I have won 10 medals at nationals, which has been fun. I have also changed the way I hunt — with a crossbow.

Three years ago, I decided to build a new stand setup on my Upper Peninsula hunting property. The spot is centrally located between three main food plots. One is my premier destination plot, which is about 5 acres. The other two are about an acre apiece. During May, I cleared the new almost-1/8-acre plot with a chainsaw, removing all the junk but leaving big stumps. I soil-tested it, sprayed it multiple times with glyphosate during spring and summer, and limed it heavily. During August, I cleaned it to the ground with a large rake, and then between the stumps, I planted Imperial No-Plow followed by a generous dose of fertilizer.

As usual, I also spiced it up by creating some mock scrapes and rubs around the perimeter. During May that year, I also built a new blind there. There were not any good trees in the area for a stand, so I constructed a box blind that is half buried into the side of a low ridge. The blind only has one window facing north toward the food plot, with a wide shooting lane that crosses a tiny stream that borders the plot. It is a pretty spot.

The blind is long and skinny, designed for crossbow usage. I can sit back in the shadows of the blind and shoot with a rest out the window. I can accurately shoot a crossbow farther than a compound bow, so this setup was set farther from the food plot than normal, which keeps deer from detecting

me when winds swirl. Being buried in dirt, scent containment is good anyway. Still, I hinge-cut several trees around that blind so deer movement downwind is almost non-existent. A smart entry and exit route to the stand rounded out the setup, and deer never know I'm there, so it's almost perfect.

My hunting area consists of big woods, with no agricultural land within miles. Deer numbers are relatively low there, as lots of wolves, bears and coyotes take a bite out of the deer herd, along with nasty winters. I even got a cougar on a trail cam this year.

We also have heavy hunting pressure in the area and don't have mandatory antler restrictions or much of a voluntary quality deer management ethic, and mature bucks are rare. Does are off limits on my property, even with an archery tag, so if I want venison, I must set my sights on what is available. Antlers grow slowly in my area, with 3-year-old bucks rarely scoring much more than 110. However, at least deer there are big bodied compared to those in the southern parts of the region, so they yield lots of venison.

YEAR 2

I didn't hunt the new blind — which I call The Hole — during the first year, as I killed two bucks (Michigan's limit) at some reliable tree-stand spots during early October.

The following year, though, I replanted most of my 5-acre food plot during May with Imperial Whitetail Clover. It was wet then, and a third of the plot was muddy or under water, so I left that portion for a late-summer planting.

In August, I tilled up the remainder of the plot with my quad-pulled disc and then went over it thoroughly with my homemade drag, which consists of a pallet wrapped with chain-link fence and a couple of sandbags for added weight. My disc leaves lots of clumps, ruts and dirt piles, so the drag levels it out nicely, creating a great seedbed. I then seeded it with Imperial Whitetail Clover, but just for kicks I also broadcasted a few bags of Whitetail Oats Plus as a cover crop. It was the first time I'd tried those oats, so that was experimental.

By September, that plot was lush with forage, and the oats were growing like cra-

zy. To say deer were hammering the plot would be an understatement. We probably have fewer than 15 deer per square mile in my area, but I had at least 50 deer on camera at that plot, with several decent bucks parading around. The Oats Plus and the Imperial Whitetail Clover were attracting deer like never before. My other plots were also getting hammered.

On Oct. 1, I hunted the Hole and saw several deer at midday, but no shooters. About 2 p.m., a big-bodied deer ambled in and started munching about 30 yards in front of me. He had six points and not much of a rack, but his body size indicated he was likely a 3-year-old, so I took aim for a shot. At the loud thump of the crossbow, the deer dashed off like a sprinter on steroids.

Those bolts fly so fast I could not see where it hit, so I waited an hour and then took up the trail. I could not find any blood, but I tracked him from the dirt he'd kicked up. I found my first speck of blood 50 yards away, and the dead deer was about 100 yards from the food plot. He was later confirmed as a 3-year-old that weighed

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179 pounds dressed. I extracted that buck from the area with as little mess and as much stealth as possible, so I did not mess up future hunts. Later that week, I killed another nice 8-pointer from that stand, so it was worth the extra effort.

ANOTHER YEAR. MORE SUCCESS

Last year, I again tried something different. My 5-acre plot of Imperial Whitetail Clover was growing better than ever that summer, so I left that alone to its normal maintenance, which consists of fertilizing in May, spraying in June and mowing later in summer. On three of my micro food plots, which get planted with Imperial No-Plow or Secret Spot, I seeded half of them in Whitetail Oats Plus. The Oats Plus, No-Plow and Secret Spot all grew great there.

On Oct. 2, I hunted The Hole and shot a dandy 10-pointer that dressed 190 pounds. I have killed my Michigan limit of two bucks three consecutive years, all during



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early October. That is what I call consistency.

I also duplicated the box blind/food plot setup at another spot close to my cabin for a south wind, so deer are now in double trouble. The real key to opening-week success at these two stands is their location on my property. Specifically, they are close to my cabin. I can enter, exit and hunt those stands without disturbing any deer deeper into my land. Therefore, I hunt those close yet prime stands hard opening week and then move deeper into my property to hunt undisturbed deer later in the week. After about two weeks, I let

my property rest for a week. Telemetry research has shown that pressured deer return to normal movement patterns after about one week, so that rest period resets my property. Throughout the season, I repeat that process, including mixing in hunts elsewhere, which helps keep the deer at ease and my odds maximized. In recent years, though, I have not gotten much past that first week, thanks mostly to finely tuned setups with prime food plots near camp.



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