

If you're new to food plotting or your current plot location lacks deer activity, let these parameters guide you in choosing the best location your property offers.

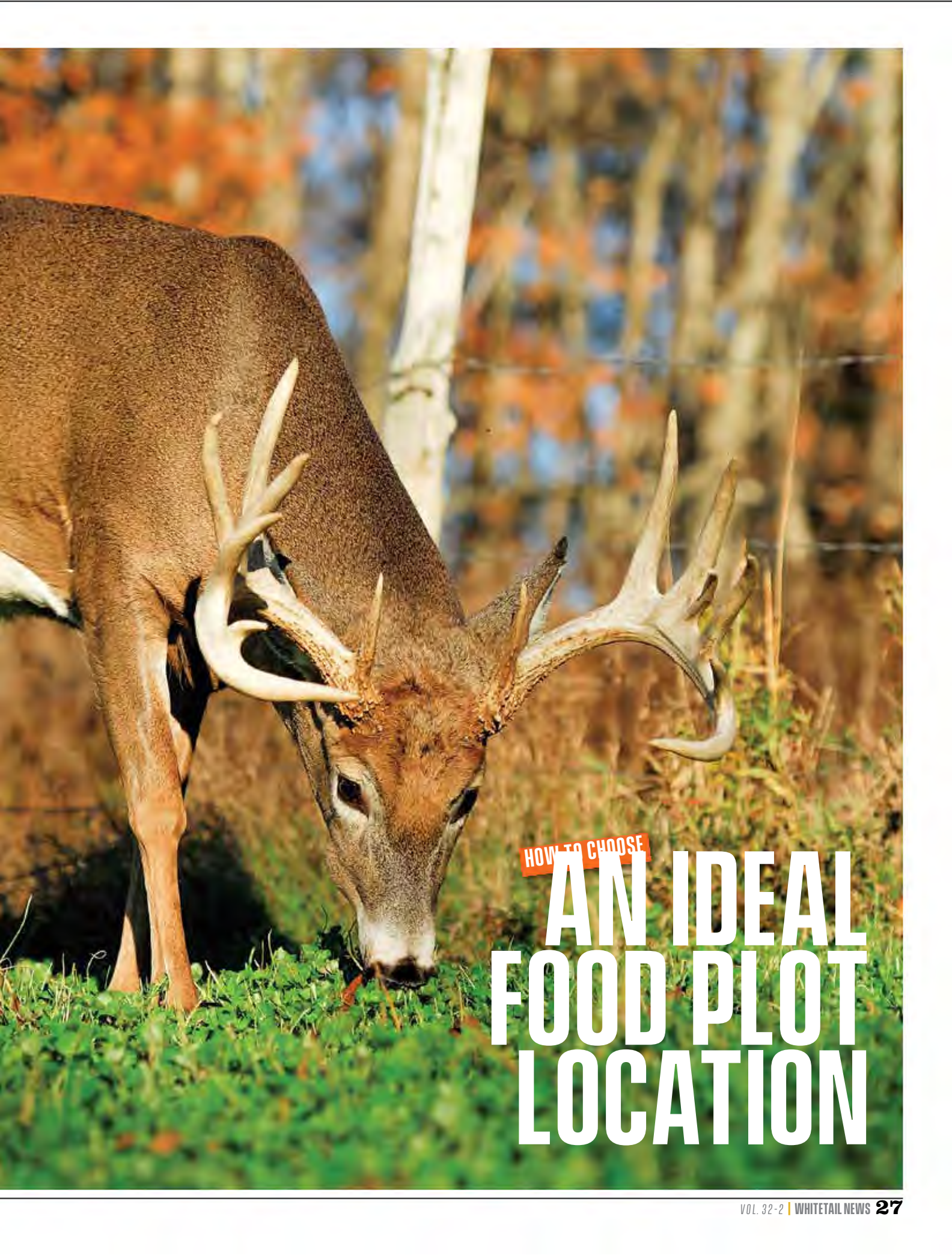
■ by Darron McDougal

Anticipation builds as you park the big equipment in the barn and begin praying for rain. Rains come, and the seeds soon germinate and take root. Before long, the brown dirt morphs into a luscious green carpet. “Wildlife will flock to this,” you think, as you anticipate opening day’s arrival. Unfortunately, your trail cameras unveil minimal movement before and during deer season. In a blink, deer season flashes by like a lightning bolt, and the only mature buck that hit your plot during the season was a one-time nightwalker your trail camera captured during the pre-rut. Bummer.

That feels terrible when you’ve invested time, money, blood, sweat and tears into cultivating a beautiful plot. Your lack of return on investment isn’t necessarily because you planted the wrong thing. Perhaps it’s the location you chose. The saying, “If you build it, they will come,” doesn’t always ring true when trying to attract deer with a food plot. Several factors affect how, why and when deer use particular food sources, and they have a common denominator: location.

I’m not an expert wildlife biologist with all the answers. I’m just a deer hunter like you, and through time spent in the woods, I’ve learned a lot about deer tendencies simply by paying attention to details for the past 20 years. I believe you’ll find these points helpful as you prepare to nail down an ideal location for this year’s food plot.





HOW TO CHOOSE

AN IDEAL FOOD PLOT LOCATION

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“UNDERSTAND WHERE DEER BED, THE PREVAILING WIND DIRECTION, ADJACENT FARMING PRACTICES AND HOW THEY FACILITATE DEER MOVEMENT, AND NATURALLY OCCURRING FOREST FOODS AND HOW THEY WILL AFFECT YOUR PLOT LOCATION.”

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Of course, the most fundamental aspects to consider when choosing a plot location are prevailing winds and where deer that might use your plot are bedding. In other words, don't create a situation where you'll have almost no opportunities to hunt the plot. Try to peg a location mostly downwind (prevailing wind considered) from where deer are bedding. Use a map-based app such as Plot Perfection to reach some conclusions about possible bedding areas on and off your land. You can also walk your land and try to jump deer during spring, but I don't suggest it during summer or closer to fall, as it could prove detrimental.

Also, positioning a plot too close to a bedding area can be risky, as you might

blow deer out when you arrive to hunt. There isn't a magic distance, but consider how quietly you can access the stand, and then choose a location accordingly.

Adjacent farming practices should be considered next, as they can hurt or help your cause. If deer must walk through your property to get from a bedding area to large bean, corn or alfalfa fields on other properties, that's a huge plus. Planting food along their travel routes gives them a reason to stage on your property, and they'll likely do so during daylight if you minimize pressure. But, if deer don't have to walk through your property to reach adjacent agriculture, planting a small food plot and hoping it will become a destination is unrealistic.

It doesn't mean you can't have an effective small food plot. It just means that

you'll have to temper your expectations, because your property simply doesn't offer a best-case scenario.

You must also consider potential forest foods that can compete with your plot, and their location. In areas with oaks, the acorn drop can greatly affect deer activity around your plot. If your plot isn't near oaks, expect deer activity to plummet when acorns fall, as deer prefer to feed in the timber, not in the open, for security. If you can add a food plot where oaks or other mast-producing trees exist, though, your food plot will likely remain active.

Another preliminary consideration is soil quality. You can improve soil quality through lime and fertilization, but if you have varied soil types on your property, you might consider choosing a good location that also provides optimal soil that requires less preparation.

To summarize, you must understand where deer bed, the prevailing wind direction, adjacent farming practices and how they facilitate deer movement, and naturally occurring forest foods and how they will affect your plot location during deer season. Then, evaluate soil pH before moving forward. Not all properties are created equal, but these considerations will guide you in doing the best you can with what you have.

EXISTING CLEARINGS

You do not have to level trees and dig out stumps. Do not work harder than you must. If an existing clearing is ideally located based on critical criteria, cultivate your plot there.

If an area lacks trees for a stand (talking specifically about bowhunting), that might hinder you from planting a plot at an existing opening. Maybe it is solid ground that abuts a cattail slough or a wide-open CRP field with tall grass for bedding. Do not let a lack of trees stop you. Instead, get creative with your ambush. Brush in a ground blind well before the season, or haul in an enclosed



elevated blind. Do not pass up great locations for silly reasons. Simply adapt.

Size should not govern your decision to plant or not plant an existing opening. If the opening is small — one-eighth of an acre or smaller — don't overlook it. Again, we're talking about choosing an ideal location, and a small plot at a great location can be better than a big plot in a poor location. Plus, be attentive to opportunities to enlarge that opening to plant more food.

If your property is amidst large timber with no agriculture, an existing opening — large or small — planted in Imperial Whitetail Clover or Fusion could become choice dining for many local deer. It might take a season or two for them to really make it their own, but with no competing agriculture in the area, even a small plot in the big timber can become dynamite.

Of course, don't try to force a plot into an existing opening if it's at a poor location. In that case, call in the big equipment, and create a new opening at a better spot.

CREATE A NEW CLEARING

Creating a new clearing is exciting and can give you the latitude to put food where it counts. But much forethought should go into this. Big habitat changes are semi-permanent. That can be a good thing, but it can be horrible if you're off the mark. In other words, you can't hit the undo button and start again after the clearing is done. What you've done will alter

deer movements for better or for worse, and you'll have to live with it for many seasons. So, plan wisely before you fire up the chainsaw and skid steer.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Always remember your plot's purpose. On large parcels, you might have destination food sources that aren't intended for hunting and also smaller sub-plots at staging areas between bedding and destination food sources. If you're on a 40-acre parcel, you might have only one or two plots intended for hunting. The plot's purpose helps you define a good location.

Also, consider what type of hunting your plots are intended for, as that also pertains to location. If your plot is for archery hunting, you'll want to lay it out so most, if not all, deer that come to feed will enter within easy archery range. In contrast, a long, linear plot can be excellent for a rifle hunter. Not all locations can be crafted to those dimensions, so choose the location that best allows you to craft the plot for your hunting application.

Every property is unique, and there isn't a one-size-fits-all location for the best food plot. You'll need to consider the points we've discussed and then apply common sense as you select plot locations. If you do that, you'll probably orchestrate a more productive hunting season than the one in my opening paragraph.



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