



LAST-OPTION SAVES: FOOD PLOT REDOS

Sometimes, you must deep-six that failed food plot and start again. But that's OK. Here's what you should do.

■ by Josh Honeycutt

■ If spring food plots fail, it's often best to wait until fall to replant them. That way, you avoid trouble from drought and weeds.



Food plots can make a man's hair turn gray much sooner than it should, but that usually happens to fellows who don't follow proper protocols and procedures. Regardless of whether you cut corners, Mother Nature takes her toll or some freak encounter occurs, sometimes it's best to cut bait and start from scratch.

Wired Outdoors' Jason Say knows all about that. He understands food plot failures happen and recognizes how to identify them. He also has a knowledge bank filled with last-option saves for when food plots fail. At some point, the smart move is a food plot redo.

REASONS FOR FOOD PLOT FAILS

Food plots die for many reasons. Some are obvious yet common mistakes that shouldn't happen. Others are less so and aren't as easy to predict. And some aren't combatable until the last minute, if at all.

You can prevent most food plot failures. Say has been planting food plots for 15 years, and he's learned how to avoid the most common mistakes. The first? Not soil sampling. The worst thing a food plotter can do is try to wing it on lime and general fertilizer.

"They're going to spend \$400 to \$500 on lime and seed and not do a \$12 soil sample," he said. "It's never made sense to me. I soil-sample every one of my food plots — even my perennial plots."

Of course, soil conditions aren't the same from one location to the next. They can even differ in each quadrant of a food plot. The remedy for one area of a property can be different than other nearby locations.

Further, soil conditions can differ from one year to the next in the same square foot of dirt. That makes it important to do soil samples each year and not rely on past sample reports.

"I've planted [the same] food plots for 15 years," Say said. "And every year, I soil-sample them, it's something different. It isn't the same every year. I don't care how well you think you know your soil. The guys who are most successful in food plotting are the guys who don't cut corners."

Failing to prepare a good seedbed is another common mistake. Ensuring quality seed-to-soil contact is important for any seed you plant, regardless of the blend or variety. If it doesn't reach the soil, it won't grow.

Also, if you don't adequately cover seeds, birds and other animals can consume them before they have a chance to grow.



“WE GOT RAIN THE NEXT COUPLE OF DAYS, AND I ENDED UP WITH PHENOMENAL FOOD PLOTS.”

■ Food plot failures can be frustrating, but you have options to save the day, provided you use the right methods.

“Maybe you don’t get rain for a while, you have a bunch of turkeys and birds, and you get a lot of the seeds picked,” Say said. “That’s a common occurrence you can avoid.”

Choosing the wrong blend or seed variety is another blunder. Say said planting a seed blend that’s wrong for conditions can lead to failure. For example, planting Imperial Clover in super-dry soil won’t work well.

Beyond that, sometimes you can do everything (mostly) right but still have a bad food plotting experience. For example, some people might think they have food plot failure but it was merely over-browsed.

“I’ve seen where guys plant a small food plot in the woods, and it’s an eighth of an acre,” Say said. “They’re like, it never grew. And I’m like, put up an exclusion cage. And they’re like, yeah, the deer just wiped it out. It never had a chance to grow.”

Plants that deer really like, and those that are palatable early in the growing process, are more susceptible to over-browsing. Say said Power Plant is a good example.

“If you’re going to plant it, you need to

plant at least an acre, if not two,” he said. “If you plant a smaller food plot, it gets mowed down.”

Of course, food plotters can also experience things they rarely expect to happen, such as blights, diseases, insects and severe weather.

“Army worms were a big one this year,” Say said. “Honestly, I’d never heard of army worms. A good friend of mine plants plots in Kentucky. In a week, they wiped out three of his plots. That was across the state this year. I saw a ton of photos where guys had problems with that.”

Fortunately, if detected early enough, insecticides can kill those nuisances, among others. If noticed too late, which often happens in remote areas, it leads to food plot failure, and a redo is in order.

Common and uncommon reasons aside, some food plots fail, and we never really determine why.

“There are even times when I talk to guys and it’s hard to determine what happened,” Say said. “Their soil pH looks good. They limed and fertilized. Sometimes, plots just don’t grow, even when they should have.”

There’s always a cause, of course, but these can be difficult to determine. It’s usually an underlying factor that leads to failure, such as dry conditions, pests or disease. Nonetheless, you have options to save your food plots, provided you deploy the right methods.

SPRING FOOD PLOT FAILS: PLAN B

On the surface, it might seem as if spring food plots are easier to redo than summer crops. After all, there’s plenty of growing season left to get them back up and running, right? Well, not really.

“When I talk to a guy and their spring food plot fails, 99 percent of the time, I’ll tell them to wait and replant in fall,” Say said. “By the time you’d replant [in spring], you start to run into those dry summer months. Plus, the weeds you battle in summer are hardy. So if you have a food plot fail in spring, just replant in fall.”

The only time it makes sense to replant a spring food plot in spring is if a late frost kills it very early, and you still have plenty of spring weather to jumpstart a second plot. If the plot fails in late spring or early summer, it’s best to follow Say’s advice and wait until fall.

FALL FOOD PLOT FAILS: PLAN B

The remedy is different in fall. You need forage for fall and winter, and the only way to get it is if something grows in your fall food plots. There is no waiting until spring.

"It's important to determine when it's time to panic," Say said. "Let's say you planted at the beginning of August. You get to the end of August, it's been very dry and no sprouts appear. It's very sparse. That's when you must decide, because you have only four weeks of growing season left if you do reseed it."

That's from a Northeastern or Midwestern perspective, though. Say is from Pennsylvania. If you're in the South, it's different. You have a little more time to react because of milder climates.

"Like the guy who had army worms in Kentucky, he did the exact same thing I did two years ago when I had my food plots fail," Say said. "You have a certain growing season for certain blends. When I have a food plot failure, I'm looking for the seed blend that grows the most tonnage in the shortest amount of

time. Most of the time, that's going to be Whitetail Institute No Plow. It has saved me in the past."

KNOWING WHEN TO START AGAIN

"Food plots sometimes fail for one reason or another," Say said. "Whether you replant can depend on how much growing season is left, among other things. So often, you get calls from a guy, and they say they planted their food plot and haven't gotten rain for a week. They're like, 'Should I replant?' You're like, 'No, man, it's going to be OK.' Ninety percent of the time, you're going to get what you need. It's going to be fine. Don't panic."

But in 2020, Say panicked.

"We had a perfect storm, so to speak," he said. "We got rain the day after we planted, which was just enough to get a little germination. Then we didn't get rain for six weeks. It was done. I had to make a choice at that point. I had nine plots that I could tell were going to fail. I'd never had anything like that happen before."

Of course, you can chalk that up to Mother Nature. She teased those food

plots just enough to spark growth but then pulled the rug out from under their feet. Yes, she can be a nasty little trickster. But make no mistake, the old gal is in control.

"I was wondering if I should take my own advice or whether that was a situation where we have a little growing season left to where we can do something," Say said. "I did and made the right decision. I went back into those nine plots, and they were dirt still. Nothing had grown because it hadn't rained in six weeks. But we had rain in the forecast, so I took a disc harrow, roughed that dirt up and seeded with No-Plow from Whitetail Institute. We got rain the next couple of days, and I ended up with phenomenal food plots."

So if your food plots fail and a redo is required, use Say's last-option saves to turn plot failure into prosperity. Your deer herd — and season — might depend on it.



Get the Right Equipment for Your Plot

Lime Spreaders & Tilling Machines



- spread pulverized or pelletized lime
- ground driven system dispenses evenly
- made of heavy gauge sheet metal
- heavy duty tires and wheels
- three models — 500 lb to 2000 lb.
- tractor and ATV models



- excellent ground preparation implement
- quickly tears up old growth and creates the best seedbed for food plots
- strong steel frame with many options
- change angle of disc blades easily
- tractor and ATV models


GroundBuster
"Making it Greener on Your Side"

JR Metal: GroundBusters • www.groundbusters.com
52 Hess Road, Leola, PA 17540 • (717) 656-6241

Call today and learn how our equipment can save time and money!