



WHAT I'VE LEARNED FROM
FOOD PLOTTING

The author knows Imperial products have profoundly improved his hunting experience and success rate under tough conditions.

■ story and photo by *Michael Veine*

Food plotting has been a big part of my hunting activities for three decades.

I know my efforts have profoundly improved my hunting experience and success rate, along with the quality of deer on my property. In fact, nowadays, I enjoy plot work almost as much as hunting. One of the things I like best about food plotting is the learning process that never ends. With the evolution of food plot seeds, products and techniques, led by the White-tail Institute, it just keeps improving. Hunters are connecting with the land more than ever before thanks largely to food plots.

Last year started as a dismal year in the whitetail woods. I canceled my annual spring work trip to my Upper Peninsula, Michigan, hunting property because of piles of lingering snow in early May. When I finally got there later in May, spring flooding was going full steam, and the seasonal road to my property had washed out and was impassable. My plans to replant my food plots were dashed. My largest food plot is five acres, and during my next trip in June, the entire western side of that plot was still under water from spring flooding. Some of the smaller plots were wet, too. I planted and fertilized what I could mostly with Imperial Whitetail Clover and revised my plans for more planting in late summer.

I traveled there again in mid-July, and the grass and weeds were so high I couldn't spray the Imperial Whitetail Clover. I decided to mow the freshly planted plots and spray glyphosate over the dried areas I couldn't plant to prepare those sites for an August planting. I had been mowing for years with an old modified lawn tractor, and a few minutes into mowing, the motor blew up, rendering the tractor into junk. I had actually been anticipating that, though, and was planning to buy a new commercial-grade zero-turn mower. This new mower cut down the plot perfectly.

Returning to my hunting property in mid-August, the Upper Peninsula was in the midst of a wet summer. There was still standing water in uncommon areas. The clover I'd planted in spring was growing, but the grass and weed growth was thigh-high, so I had to mow it again. I disked, fertilized and otherwise prepared the seedbeds in the unplanted areas and then seeded it with Imperial Whitetail Clover.

Just for kicks, I bought a couple of bags of Whitetail Oats Plus and seeded it with the

clover, mainly as a cover crop but also to choke out the weeds and hopefully spice up the plot. I seeded my small food plots with Secret Spot and No-Plow, which I've been using for years with good success.

I returned to my property for my annual bird hunting trip in mid-September and found the new oats and clover planting was looking extremely good, with lots of fresh green growth. Deer sign abounded, and all of my plots were getting hammered by whitetails.

I've learned that a good hunting strategy on my food plot-laced property is to hunt close to my cabin during my first hunts. Then, as my hunting pressure starts to affect those areas, I move deeper into my property, always hunting unpressured deer. Opening morning, Oct. 1, was a gully-washer, and my first evening hunt was cut short when winds cranked up, flushing me out of my tree stand before I was ejected. The next day was another washout with an all-day rain.

The weather finally let up the third day, so I hunted a stand that's only a couple of hundred yards from my cabin. It overlooks a small food plot between a thick stream-bottom bedding area and my 5-acre food plot, which deer were browsing like crazy. As I developed my property years ago, things didn't really explode until I added that big food plot. It doubles the deer population on my property when it's in full production and was the tipping point in having enough forage to keep them there throughout fall.

A few does and fawns were the first visitors during that hunt, followed by a yearling spike and then a big-bodied 2-year-old fork. I'm not a trophy hunter these days, and because we can't shoot antlerless deer at my property, I just target big-bodied legal bucks. With two buck tags for the Upper Peninsula, that means one buck must have at least three points on one antler, and the other buck must have at least four points on an antler. As such, the big fork was off limits. An hour later, I saw another big-bodied deer coming out of the swamp. He looked bigger than the fork, and when I counted six points on his noggin, I shouldered my crossbow, took careful aim and let one fly.

It was a quartering-away shot that looked perfect, so after a wait, I went after him. Following his trail of upturned earth for 75 yards surprisingly revealed no blood. Then I found a speck, which led to a drop and

then a spray. Scanning ahead, I saw him piled up. I've learned that some deer just don't bleed much, but you must be diligent. That 6-pointer dressed out at 179 pounds and was later aged by the DNR at 3.5 years old. Incidentally, after tagging that deer, I returned to camp, got my sled and removed the deer from the hunting area with as much stealth and as little mess as possible, gutting him where I don't hunt and burying the innards so as not to attract predators. Stealth after the kill sometimes pays big dividends, especially on smaller properties with limited areas to hunt.

The next day was a windy, rainy, snowy no-hunting day. The rain eventually stopped, but the wind was still blowing too hard to hunt from a tree, so I decided to hunt the ground blind where I had killed the 6-pointer two days earlier. That blind is dug into the side of a ridge like a bunker, so I call it The Hole, and it's perfect in high winds.

Much like my first hunt at that spot, I saw some antlerless deer first. Several hours later, almost at midday, a nice buck marched through. Glassing him to make sure he was legal, when I counted eight points, I went into kill mode and lined him up for almost an identical shot as the first deer. He was walking around a stump along the edge of the food plot quartering away, so I aimed for the opposite shoulder and pulled the trigger. This time, the buck turned and ran back into the swamp, and I thought I heard him crash a short distance away. Taking up that trail 45 minutes later revealed a lot of blood immediately, and the wide, short blood trail ended at another 3-year-old buck. My season was finished.

My wife only hunts with a rifle and buys one tag. She also had a great hunt in November, culminating with another 8-pointer hanging from our buck pole. Because my main clover planting was lagging behind the norm, those Whitetail Oats Plus really paid off. Deer seemed to go nuts over those oats. Even though deer numbers in our area are at a modern low because of recent bad winters and high predator levels (wolves, coyotes, bears and bobcats), we still had good hunting at our little oasis in the big woods. Next year should be even better, and as the learning process continues, the future looks great.

