



■ The author mows an Imperial Whitetail Clover field. Even small plots will attract whitetails if they are high quality and maintained well.

MANAGEMENT PRACTICES:

THINGS HAVE CHANGED

Successful food plotting involves many more considerations than early efforts decades ago. But as modern land managers know, the work is well worth it.

■ Text and Photos by *Gerald Almy*

Dawn was just a faint orange promise in the east when I saw the first forms of deer in the Winter-Greens plot. Slowly raising my binoculars, I began scrutinizing them carefully through the 8X optics. Doe, doe, doe — buck.

Not only a buck, but a nice deer I'd had my eyes on, with a tall narrow rack that almost joined at the main beam tips. Shifting the crossbow slightly, I centered my scope just behind his shoulder blade and squeezed the trigger. The sharp snap of the bow string and scattering deer

knocked any morning sleepiness out of me. I watched as the buck faltered, ran hard and then seemed to go down just inside a patch of woods bordering the plot.

After waiting a half-hour to be safe, I walked toward where the deer had disappeared and found a bright red blood trail. Minutes later, I wrapped my fingers around a fine Virginia buck.

That hunt was partly the product of luck. But like so many things in life, it was also a reward for lots of hard work. In that case, the work started with extensive re-

search about the best food plots for deer on my land. It then involved preparing the site, not cutting corners, purchasing the best seeds and following all the steps required to produce a high-quality field of forage that would attract bucks.

People who don't grow food plots or are new to the game sometimes think you can just toss out some seed and produce a lush, nutritious food plot that will attract deer like a magnet. In times past, that might have worked. Well, sort of. The plots were green, anyway. And they attracted some deer. But nutritious? Not very. Lush? Not too often.

And frankly, the only reason that simple approach worked was because those old-timers were among the few people offering anything for deer.

But tossing out a bit of rye or wheat will not likely pay dividends in 2022. Food plotting has become highly sophisticated, with land managers dedicating extensive time, effort and finances to create the best plots for whitetails. The plot I grew, and most of the best ones across the country, involve much more than tossing out some seed.

They don't involve backbreaking work and an inordinate amount of time. But they require a bit more than the earliest food plot pioneers put into their efforts. And most important, it involves more informed effort. That translates into many things, including using the high-

est-quality seed, made available by years of research and development by university agronomists and private companies that pioneered the science of creating new and improved deer forages, foremost among them the Whitetail Institute of North America.

THE MODERN SCENE

The plot that attracted the buck at the beginning of this article was not the product of throwing a bit of seed out and waiting for rain. It involved carefully selecting the best site for growth of the forage and monitoring the sunlight at the plot to make sure it was sufficient for the planting. It involved choosing the best forage blend after careful thought about the pros and cons of each prospective plant type for the location and soil variety. It involved making sure the site was weed-free, with herbicide treatments and multiple passes with a tiller.

I also sampled the ground, taking soil tests at several spots to see what nutrients were needed. Sure, I could have thrown out some 10-10-10 and the plot likely would have done OK. But the soil test revealed exactly what proportions of nitrogen, phosphate and potash were needed for the best growth. The pH, or acidity, of the soil was also detailed in the sample, letting me amend it with the right amount of lime to bring it to a level that would provide maximum forage

growth.

After the perennial plot was thriving, I addressed competing weeds by mowing at the right growth stage and weather conditions to clip off seed heads and reduce the volume of weeds. That step also stimulated the growth of new, more tender and nutritious foliage. No broad-leaf weeds threatened the plot, but several competing grasses were, even after mowing, so it required treatment with Arrest Max.

Was it worth the fuss? I believed so when I wrapped my hands around that crossbow buck. And to be honest, the effort involved was not work for this habitat manager and whitetail hunter. To the contrary, it was a fun and engaging hobby. Like most outdoorsmen and food plotters, I enjoy the many facets of this pursuit. And like many endeavors, the more you put into it, the more you get out of it.

In the old days, with few people growing forage for deer, food plotting meant spreading some rye or wheat out in late summer or early fall to create a green field. It was also often sown for cattle, so the needs of livestock were paramount, with deer in many cases an afterthought. Whitetails came to those ag fields and smaller, haphazardly planted plots, which offered an oasis of food compared to the surrounding stands of open, mature timber. And hunters killed some



■ The author gets ready to put in Power Plant.

nice bucks on them.

But as the title to this piece says, things have changed. In the three-plus decades since Ray Scott introduced the first version of Imperial Whitetail Clover, food plotting has developed dramatically, with multiple companies offering various seed blends to attract deer. (Many of those products from competitors are mostly just re-bagged generic seeds, but that's another story.)

Hunters have learned that to attract bucks, they'd better step up and plant the best products available. They've learned that if they don't provide the most palatable and nutritious offerings, deer might camp out at a neighbor's property with better forage, more food, greater variety or food that lasts longer.

Rather than just trying to attract animals during hunting season, as was done in the past, today's food plotters realize that to hold whitetails and let them reach older ages, they must provide forage all year. A deer can't stop eating except in fall, when most people used to put plots out. A buck can eat natural foods at other times, but many of them are of poor nutritional quality during midsummer and late winter.

A food plotter who offers the best forages during those difficult times, even when hunting isn't open, will attract more deer and also likely lure in mature bucks. If deer have food available 365 days per year on one tract and not another, guess where they will make their home?

In the past, food plotting decisions were simple: rye, oats or wheat? Today's hunter/land manager has a vastly wider selection of forages for various soil types, times of year, locations and goals.

Yes, things have changed. There is, whether we like it, competition to attract deer. Better plants and smarter effort create the plots that attract deer best.

TODAY'S STEPS

To grow the best plots possible, you must take several steps, as mentioned. First, consider your soil type. It might be rich bottomland or drier upland. It might have balanced pH or be acidic. Or you might have various types of soil at various parts of your property. Each needs to be approached as a unique sit-

uation. Whitetail Institute has lots of helpful material at whitetailinstitute.com to help you decide what plantings might be optimum for each soil type. And its staff will offer all the help they can with phone consultations.

After you've settled on a forage for a specific site, conduct a soil test, which is the best way to determine what you should do to amend it with nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. This will also tell you whether you need lime to boost the pH into a less acidic range, preferably 6.5 to 7. If pH is extremely low, the Institute has special-purpose seed mixtures for challenging conditions, such as Extreme and Edge, which will thrive in lower-quality soil.

These steps were seldom taken in the old days. But if you want the best plots in 2022, you'd best up your game and get the soil to its maximum potential before beginning to plant.

While you're preparing to add lime and fertilizer, you can begin thoroughly removing unwanted vegetation with non-specific herbicides and several tilling sessions. Add the lime as early as possible during the tilling or disking process so it has sufficient time to reduce the acidity. Try to bring it up to 6.5 or higher. The fertilizer, on the other hand, is most helpful when applied soon before planting and worked in with the last pass of the tiller. The final step involves carefully adding the right amount of seed, planting it to the exact depth recommended and doing so during the proper time for the forage and your location.

After they mature, some forages don't require additional maintenance. Perennials, however, such as Imperial Whitetail Clover and Alfa-Rack Plus, often benefit from mowing once or several times per season. Some landowners skip those maintenance steps. And they pay the price with less attractive plots, more weeds and fewer deer.

Cutting should be done when the weather is not too hot or dry. And it needs to be done when the weeds are slightly higher than the forage. By nipping the seed heads off, you can reduce the weed and grass growth dramatically. Cutting some of the flowering perenni-

al tops also stimulates fresh, tender and more nutritious plants to regrow.

Weeds might be controlled sufficiently in that manner, but extra spraying with selective herbicides such as Arrest Max, to reduce competing grasses, and Slay, to tackle competitive broadleaf weeds, is often required. Old timers might scoff at that effort. But today, most hunters/land managers don't mind the extra work. It's part of the game — the greatest hobby I know.

Another new addition involves planting tall annuals, such as Conceal, leading to plots and sometimes right into them. The goal is to make deer, especially mature bucks, feel more secure approaching the forage. You can also create access routes to the plot with shields or strips of these sorghums, letting you slip in without being detected. Deer are hunted far more intensely than in the old days, so anything that makes them feel more secure using a feeding site is helpful.

CONCLUSION

Many other management practices have changed. Adding water sources, bedding cover, transition corridors, staging areas and fruit trees are beneficial projects that will make your food plots attract and hold deer. We've learned that creating a sanctuary that's never hunted is also important. Having an area mature bucks can go when they feel pressured gives them a feeling of security and encourages them to stay at your property.

When you combine those extras with the best food plot forages, you will have done everything to improve the quality of the deer herd and increase the odds of holding them on your land.

Yes, things have changed, like they do in almost every aspect of life. I used to love pecking out articles on my IBM Selectric. But you won't catch me writing with one today. Not all changes are good, but the development of efficient desktop personal computers is one I'll embrace. And using high-quality food plot forages created especially for whitetails instead of generic seeds meant for cattle is one I'll also embrace.

