



THE CREATION OF A FOOD PLOT

FROM JUNGLE TO EDEN

Most land managers know the basics of clearing and starting a new plot. However, fresh plots in remote locations introduce several challenges. Here's how to do it right.

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I don't like hot, humid, muggy treks through tick-infested woods thick with viny vegetation, much of which pokes and rips your skin or leaves you with a breakout you get to enjoy for several days. Yet almost every year, I endure some expedition to discover an area where a food plot would almost guarantee a taxidermy bill at the end of deer season. Never mind that I might have scouted the area several times, because like a sculptor, maybe you just have to look harder to see what's within after you remove the covering.

In my early days of food plotting, I built plot sites on my parents' farm, and although Dad loves to hunt, he's also a farmer, so land that was already cleared or tilled was used for raising hay or row crops, or as pasture for cows. So to plant plots, I had to scavenge through less-used parts of the farm, which typically meant areas not extremely conducive to planting or sowing, at least in the state that I found them. In those days, when I didn't have a pot to pee in or a window to throw it out of, my area-clearing tools were fairly rudimentary and powered predominantly by my muscle. My arsenal included a chainsaw, a sprayer, rakes, maybe a drag behind a four-wheeler and whatever other hand-powered sweat-inducing device I could drag into the brush.

The results were OK — some better than others — based on the land I picked and the amount of effort I put into the projects. As time passed and I had more money, I upgraded a bit with a small tractor and a self-propelled walk-behind brush mower. Dad actually bought the brush mower, but I logged the miles behind it. By the way, self-propelled does not equate to a leisurely stroll of satisfying land clearing. If you're on a nice flat piece of land with a well-manicured lane for getting in and out, it might be like the commercials on TV.

But the places I took that contraption were far from picturesque and bordered on suicidal. I remember one ill-conceived food plot enterprise during which I needed to take the mower across a large creek with 8- to 10-foot banks on both sides. You can't carry the mower. You have to "drive" it, which meant pulling, pushing, hoisting and cussing. I guess really it was

more like carrying it. After I got across, I faced a walk through thick multiflora rose bushes and tree saplings for 400 yards between me and my destination atop an oak flat. After several hours of toil, I was only 100 yards past the creek, and the mower was buried in a brush-hidden ditch. It took me, Dad and a buddy to pull that thing out. No food plot graced the oak flat.

Later, I graduated to a skid loader, bigger tractor and even sometimes a bulldozer. But even now, as my hair starts to show hints of gray, I sometimes walk behind that self-propelled mower — actually I bought one after tearing up Dad's — in hopes I can build a deer oasis in some remote area where big equipment can't roam.

Regardless of how you do it and what equipment you use, there are a few tricks and considerations when building remote food plots. The main considerations require you to ask where and how, and you can figure the rest out from there.

PICKING THE SPOT

During my younger days, I often picked areas to build food plots because they just seemed like the right spot. Some were in the right spot, but many were not and just resulted in a lot of work for nothing. I began to change my thinking, not starting with the question of "where?" but rather "why?"

For example, a classic remote food plot setup involves building a plot between a bedding area and a main food source, such as an agricultural field or stand of white oaks. Why do you want to create this scenario? Usually, you hope deer will stop and use the plot on their way to the larger food source. You're creating a staging area that has food deer desire. Pretty simple, right? It's simple in concept but often not as straightforward in practice. For example, if you place your food plot too close to the bedding area, it might make deer use a different bedding area, and it can be difficult to access without busting deer. If you get too far away from the bedding area, you risk deer not showing up until darkness is approaching. So you should put it in the middle? Not necessarily because in some cases, the middle is in an area where it's impossible to construct a plot.

Further, you have to consider deer movement. If there seems to be a concentration of deer travel and trails close to a bedding area, and trails spread out from there to nighttime feeding spots, you should cheat your plot closer to the bedding area. In some cases, bedding areas are more spread out, and trails and travel areas converge on the main feeding location. Then it makes more sense to build the plot closer to the destination.

That might seem a bit too detailed, but I can tell you from experience it makes a difference. Deer like to travel in a specific pattern. That pattern might be dictated by protective cover, but also ease of travel. Natural terrain or obstacles will affect how a deer moves. The objective is to work with that natural travel tendency and place a food plot in an area with the highest likelihood of travel route congregation.

Maybe the why for building a food plot is not to create a transitional plot but rather a destination food plot. Consider several things, such as the size of the plot and whether it's in an area deer already frequent. Destination plots tend to be bigger than true hunting plots, so the area you pick must typically accommodate a minimum of 1 to 3 or more acres. Although destination means deer will seek out that area, it's still best to locate the plot at a spot deer naturally frequent, with close escape cover and as far from human presence as possible.

When you've figured out the why, you can really hone in on the exact where. The first thing to consider is ease of access for food plot equipment. In an area that can only be accessed on foot or maybe ATV, you must understand your limitations. Such an area will likely be smaller, because the power to produce the plot will be supplied by muscle or maybe smaller ATV equipment. Creating a 1- to multiple-acre plot might be possible, but it's likely not practical. If you can access the area with a tractor or other tillage power sources, size can be a bit more flexible. But you must consider the extent that the area must be cleared to create the plot. If you're dealing with large mature trees and don't fancy the idea of creating a tractor slalom, you might be faced with some major dozer work. That's possible, but it can lighten the wallet unless you have a dozer.

Another consideration of location is soil type and condition. You can bring poor soil back to the point of productivity, but the poorer the soil, the more work, money and time that will take. If the soil in your new plot has a low pH, it might take 2 or more tons of lime per acre to neutralize to a pH close to 7. If you're hauling lime on your back or via ATV, that can be a major task. And regardless, it will take some time to get the soil into condition when using regular ag lime.

The good news is you can use other methods to help neutralize soils in remote locations. Impact from Whitetail Institute can dramatically improve soil pH and can be applied via an ATV sprayer. Soil type, such as sandy versus loam, will dictate the specific forage type you plant in your food plot to help ensure success. A heavy soil is more suited to clover, but a well-drained soil is better for brassicas and alfalfa. If you want to plant a late fall/winter plot of Imperial WinterGreens, the area you choose should have well-drained soil.

Finally, there's the question of huntability as it pertains to entry and egress, as well as stand type and location. Actually, using the word finally doesn't mean that's the last consideration. It actually should be toward the beginning of the decision-making process. It's extremely frustrating to go through all the work of creating a plot only to find out it is un-huntable. I've done this more times than I would like to admit, simply because I really wanted a plot in that spot. Complications such as bad prevailing winds, the lack of a good route to and from the stand, and a general lack of good stand locations have plagued many new plots.

HOW TO CREATE YOUR NEW PLOT

Creating a food plot might seem fairly straightforward. I'm guessing many of you have read several articles about this subject and can repeat the steps faster than I can peck them out on the keyboard. Test the soil, lime and fertilize as needed, till the soil, plant the seed and watch it grow into a quality food plot. However, there are a few more details, especially when planning a new plot — one planted in a newly cleared area.

The first step in creating a new food plot is clearing the area. This can be the most labor-intensive part of the process,

depending on what you have to clear and your equipment. If the area consists of only tall grass and some brush, sweat equity with a weed eater, saw and pulling chain can get you where you need to be. If the area is thick with brush, manual removal becomes far more difficult and time consuming, and if you add bigger trees, the ante increases. A couple of years ago I bought a commercial brush cutter for my skid loader, and that makes clearing much easier but also comes with a bigger price tag.

Still, it's critical to clear the area as thoroughly as possible with whatever you have. If the area is cleared haphazardly, you will fight it for years. Brush, tree roots and thick weed debris covering the ground, or simply trying to smash down cover instead of removing it, will lead to a constant battle of tillage and weed invasiveness. In some situations, you can't get the plot completely cleared, but it's vital to get it as clear as possible. Set reasonable expectations on location, size and the plant variety planted, based on the tools you have. You might have to alter the shape of the plot to avoid a big tree or make the plot smaller to have a realistic chance of proper clearing.

Clearing the area properly will give you a good foundation, but regardless, you will still have weed challenges at the beginning. Newly cleared plots are probably sod or at least soil that has not been tilled for some time — or maybe never. Having heavy equipment to till the soil will help, but even then, the first year or two managing weed growth will play a big role in success. The lighter the tillage equipment, the more weed issues you will face, but a couple of tricks work well whether you're using light or heavy tillage equipment.

Spraying the area with glyphosate to kill grass and weeds at the root will significantly improve how well the ground will work up. If the area is brushy, you might want to spray it with brush killer a few weeks or months before clearing, which will also make the process much easier and decrease the chance for brush regrowth. Another option is burning. Done when the area is dry, this can be an extremely effective way to clear an area. The downside is you can also catch the whole county on fire if you're not careful. If you think burning is the way to go, I



recommend reaching out to experts, such as state conservation agencies or companies that specialize in burnings. It might cost you a bit on the front end, but it's far cheaper than paying for damages if the fire jumps to your neighbor's place.

When the area is cleared, the process is much the same as replanting an existing plot, but with a few additional considerations. The soil might be very acidic, especially if it has been overgrown for years, and also will likely require extra fertilizer. A soil test will set the mark you're shoot-

ing for. Then simply follow the recommendations. I know that sounds simple, but many folks do a soil sample and then don't follow through with what it recommended. You will also need to till a bit more the first time the soil is broken up, which means a few more passes than with an existing plot. Then there's weed

prevention. Even if you have sprayed or burned, you will still have to deal with weeds, especially the first year, as there will be abundant weed seed in the soil. Be ready to spray the plot with herbicide or mow to keep weeds under control.

Last, choosing the right food plot seed is important. We already talked about matching seed to soil type, but other factors come into play. If a soil is acidic, it will take some time to get the pH high enough for some food plot varieties. You might want to go with a food plot variety that doesn't require as high a pH. You can always switch to your desired planting in a year or two when the soil condition is right. Also, some food plot varieties re-

quire less tillage than others. Imperial No-Plow, Secret Spot and Bow Stand do well with minimal tilling and are great choices for new, remote food plots. Imperial Extreme is a great perennial option for new plots with poorer soil and minimal tillage. It grows well in lower pH soils and requires less tillage than other perennials.

CONCLUSION

Finding new spots to plant food plots can be exciting and fun, just like hunting a new stand, but it can also be challenging. Success is tied to proper planning and a realistic approach about where and how you'll build that plot based on what you have. But whether you have minimal equipment or a barn full of big-boy toys, if you plan well and put in the effort, you can grow a plot that you are proud of and that produces results.



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