



THE IMPORTANCE OF

SOFTFOOTED



FIELD

Early successional habitat helps make whitetails feel comfortable in food plots — one stem at a time.

■ by *Josh Honeycutt*

PHOTO BY REALTREE

Mature whitetails are fickle creatures. Anyone who's spent much time around them understands that. Their jittery nature proves it, but their frequent unwillingness to enter food plots during daylight provides additional support. Which brings me to my main point: Soft edges are critical components of grub hubs.

I rarely plant a food plot that goes directly from hardwoods to ankle-high vegetation. Doing so creates a hard edge. Instead, I use transitions to subtly ease them into the open space. Often, that takes the form of early successional habitat, such as briars, saplings and natural grasses. When not already present, that can be created by a planted crop of Whitetail Oats Plus or a combination of Oats Plus with an adjacent planting of Conceal.

Understanding and implementing soft edges can be complex. Knowing when, where, why and how to have them on the landscape is an in-depth topic, but let's chisel away at it.

THE KING OF EDGE ANIMALS

Many animals benefit from early successional habitat. Large and small game thrive in the edge cover created by

young plant growth, and William Cousins, general manager of the Whitetail Institute, is a staunch proponent of having those soft edges.

Small-game species, such as rabbits and quail, thrive in the security cover it creates. Wild turkeys enjoy the benefits of its nesting cover and bugging areas. But whitetails are dubbed the kings of edge animals. They require it for bedding, food and escape cover.

Soft edges undeniably make animals feel safer — even whitetails. They wouldn't bed in it if that weren't true or spend so much daylight time in and around it. Although edges are more often used for feeding and transitioning, animals still frequent them throughout the day.

Areas with plenty of edges tend to have higher fawn recruitment rates, too. It's more difficult for predators to locate them, which leads to higher deer densities and healthier deer. Generally, areas with underperforming deer herds lack the early successional habitat needed to thrive.

Edges usually fall into two categories: timber-based edges and field-based edges. In the woods, these are areas where two types of timber meet, such

as hardwoods and pines, or hardwoods and cedars. Field-edge habitat is the primary focus here, though.

Properties that have plenty of edges and express them in strategic ways can see better daylight activity along food sources, too. There aren't a lot of studies to prove it, but plenty of anecdotal data suggests that deer feel safer in food plots and ag fields that offer soft edges. These terrain features go by other names, including screens, buffer strips and transition zones. But although the names differ, their purpose remains the same.

Now comes the real question: Does your property have enough soft edges? Most unmanaged lands (for hunting purposes) do not.

If you have some timber — hardwoods or planted pines — you'll have some areas where the woods stop and the fields start. As mentioned, that's a hard edge.

"See what you're dealing with," Cousins said. "If you have a mature pine plantation and you can see throughout it, you don't have any cover. You need to have some. It's super important to give those animals that edge. It's a safe zone. They get out there and feel a little more comfortable."

Quality edge habitat is important for deer, especially around food plots and open areas.



PHOTO BY JOSH HONEXCUTT

When you take the level of success back to ground level, it often takes at least one to three years before it can reach adequate edge status again. Other species grow more quickly, but others grow more slowly. Unfortunately, some properties don't offer adequate edge cover. Or perhaps it's recently been removed mistakenly. Don't worry if that's



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- Proprietary high sugar oat mix — great for early fall and late winter. Annual — all planting designed for fall/winter food source.

Optimum Growing Environment:

- Soil Type: Sandy to heavy bottom land and loamy to heavy soil
- Soil pH: 6.0 - 7.5
- Sunlight: 4 to 6 hours of broken, filtered or direct sunlight a day



That's a slow process, though, which is why it's so important to leave the bushhog in the shed. When you take the level of success back to ground level, it often takes at least one to three years before it can reach adequate edge status again. Other species grow more quickly, but others grow more slowly. Unfortunately, some properties don't offer adequate edge cover. Or perhaps it's recently been removed mistakenly. Don't worry if that's

Some properties already offer abundant early successional habitat. These are regarded as natural soft edges. Often, such vegetation is mowed down and beaten back. Barring the existence of (most) invasive plant species, that's one of the worst things a land manager can do for deer.

SERVING UP SOFT EDGES

Cousins prefers to have at least 20 to 30 feet of soft edge around food plots and other open areas. This gives white-tails a lot of brushy habitat and also provides plenty of screening and visual concealment.

Short-term solutions can be better to create multiple layers. For example, it might go from big timber to small saplings to tall stems (Conceal) to medium stems (Whittail Oats Plus) to Cousins starts by planting buffer strips, and he prefers a combo approach when manually planting these edges.

"When I plant our Fusion (clover/chicory), I will use our Whittail Oats Plus as a nurse crop," he said. "That helps create a nice microenvironment while the perennials are getting established. It helps with browsing pressure. The animals will browse the oats and not just wipe out the perennials.

"Then, fast forward. When you get through the fall and winter hunting season, that next spring, when you mow or spray the oats, I'll move about 20 to 30 feet off the edge of the timber and leave that border. This is a soft edge."

That's one of his proven methods for providing great soft edges, which also double as food sources. But the important thing is allowing it to continue standing. That creates the soft edge. This is an example of a single-layer soft edge, though. When possible, it's preferable to head high, when you're spreading fertilizer, be sure you fertilize and lime that soft edge, too."

Essentially, maintain what you have. Don't disturb existing edge cover. Enhance that growth. Nurture it. We want edge cover to be at least waist high and preferably chest- to head high, when you're spreading fertilizer, be sure you fertilize and lime that soft edge, too."

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ON POINT

Managing for early successional habitat requires extensive forethought, especially for those who like to get the job done right the first time. This aspect of land management requires design skills, and when planting soft edges around fields and food plots, measuring is a must.

Those who plant food plots, such as Fusion or Whittail Oats Plus, should know what area they are planting. The same holds true for those who use Conceal to act as a buffer, edge or screen around open areas. After all, who wants to buy more (or less) seed than what they actually need?

Fortunately, there is an easy way to measure the total area of food plots and edges. Hunting apps, such as HuntStand, have measuring tools that deliver precise acreages. Then, all that's left is reading the seed labels to see how many bags you need. It's that simple.



PHOTO BY JOSH HONEYCUTT