

# *Hidden Gem:* Create a Public Land Food Plot

*If you don't own  
or lease land, planting  
a killer food plot might still  
be within your reach.*

By **Darron McDougal**

**L**et's face it: Private-land deer hunting is simply unattainable for many folks. Leases can cost thousands annually. Likewise, the per-acre price to purchase prime whitetail real estate ranges from \$2,500 to \$5,000 or more. Most can't afford that, and many who can are unable to justify spending money that way. Granted, knocking on doors to gain permission to hunt on private land is always an option, but expect to be denied many times before you get an amen.

Here's the good news: Most states across the country provide public hunting opportunities, which almost all hunters already know. In fact, many of you probably hunt or at least have hunted public land at some point. Maybe you even do it exclusively.

If you have experience with private and public-land hunting, you

know public land tends to be a far cry from private-land hunting. State wildlife agencies sometimes lease out crop rights to farmers or even cultivate food plots to improve the habitat for hunters. The problem is these food sources are typically sore thumbs. That is, anyone who hunts the property can find and hunt them just as easily as you can. Expect competition to be fierce and daylight deer activity minimal on any obvious public-land food plots or ag fields.

Even without pressure, food plots planted by a wildlife agency are rarely in ideal locations for hunting. They may attract deer and other wildlife, but there often isn't a viable ambush location ideal for prevailing winds. Or perhaps the food is simply located within easy sight of roadways, promoting nocturnal behavior. In any case, don't expect to hunt over an obvious or easy-to-reach public-land food plot and kill a whopper buck. You probably have a better chance of being struck by lightning. Maybe not, but you get my point.

That leaves just two more options if you want to hunt a food source on public land without tripping over other hunters. No. 1, try to iden-

*With property costing thousands per acre and leases reaching record-high fees, planting a food plot is often misconceived as a rich person's undertaking. But, if planting and the activities entailed therein are allowed on the public land you hunt, it's within reach for blue-collar folks after all.*

(Photo courtesy of Darron McDougal)



tify naturally occurring food sources, such as acorns or fruit trees. Another option is something most haven't considered or thought possible: Plant your own food plot on public land.

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## Study the Laws

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First, let me stress that every state has regulations that govern activities on public lands. Further, each state has multiple classifications of lands that are open to the public for hunting. Some are national forests, some are state-owned lands and others are private lands leased by the state for public hunting. There are others, too.

Each parcel might have specific regulations for planting or manipulating habitat. It may not be allowed at all. It's 100 percent your responsibility to know and follow the laws before you plant a food plot — and the activities entailed therein — on public land.

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## Risk vs. Reward

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If all is clear and you can legally plant a food plot on public land where you hunt, there's more to consider. You must understand that everyone else has the equal right to use the property in any legal manner. That includes hunting over the food plot you worked diligently to create. You must live with that possibility. It's a risk-versus-reward proposition. Obviously, though, the rewards can far outweigh the negatives if you put some forethought into your prospective plot(s) before you scatter seeds, which we'll discuss next.

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## Find Your Secret Spot

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Steve Scott, Whitetail Institute Senior Advisor, suggested smart planning and a tactical approach when locating and planting a secret food plot on public soil.

"Public land is a first-come-first-serve type of deal," he said. "As you try to identify potential planting sites, look specifically for locations that receive little to no pressure. Often, this means hiking as deep as you're physically able to reach a destination where other hunters are less likely to go. A good majority of hunters don't walk too far from their vehicles, so your additional effort can put some distance between you and them. Still, it's public land, and there are no guarantees that you'll have an undisturbed spot all to yourself."

Being a devoted public-land hunter, I rely heavily on the onX Hunt smartphone app to identify potential locations before I set foot on a parcel. HuntStand is another worthy map-based app you can use to identify tough-to-reach locations a mile or more from trails, roadways and parking areas.

If you don't already have one of these apps on your phone and do any amount of public-land hunting, you're missing a vital tool. If I had to choose between purchasing a tree stand to hunt from or one of these map-based apps, I'd go for the app every time. It's that important to my hunting approach.

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## Planting Time

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When you locate a secret spot, Scott recommended being subtle, leaving few to no indications that any activity has transpired.

"Even if you have access to implements, they likely aren't allowed on public lands, especially behind closed gates," he said. "Many public

parcels are restricted solely to foot traffic. That's a good thing. Just imagine how difficult it would be to evade pressure and create a secret plot if folks had unrestricted vehicular access.

"If implements are allowed to be used, they're probably not the best option anyway. Yes, they simplify soil preparation and reduce manual labor, but easier isn't better in this case. The more evidence of your efforts you leave behind — disrupting foliage and making tracks — the more likely folks will become nosy and follow the clues to your secret spot. Try to be as discreet as possible to keep your secret spot a secret."

A garden rake will require much more effort to create an effective food plot, but it reduces the amount of habitat disruptions, thereby masking clues to your activity and keeping most snoopers from finding your secret plot. Further, Whitetail Institute offers two products that are tailored for deep-woods, foot-traffic-only applications inaccessible to heavy implements. BowStand and Secret Spot require minimal soil preparation, and they survive and even thrive where other seed blends often fail. Both are extremely attractive and tolerate cold and drought incredibly well, and they can flourish with a minimum of three hours of broken or direct daily sun exposure.

"Once you find a good location off the beaten path that receives at least three hours of daily sun exposure," Scott said, "if possible and legal, spray existing weeds and grasses with an herbicide. When they die, expose the soil with a rake and/or other hand tools. Next, broadcast fertilizer as suggested on the package of BowStand or Secret Spot. Now, you're ready to plant. With seed-to-soil contact, either product will quickly germinate, establish and grow, creating an effective food

## *Bolster Your Secret Plot with an Attractant*

Know the regulations and laws that govern baiting or placing minerals/attractants for wildlife in your state and county, and on specific public-land parcels you're planning to hunt. Also, find out if it's legal to hunt directly over that bait or attractant. If all is clear, Whitetail Institute's Thrive or Apple Obsession can boost the effectiveness of your secret deep-woods food plot even further.

"I cannot stress it enough: When hunting public ground, make absolute certain that planting a food plot or placing attractants and hunting over them is legal," Steve Scott said.





Once you've narrowed down some potential planting sites on your map-based smartphone app, visit each one to determine planting potential based on the parameters provided within this article. (Photo courtesy of Rebecca McDougal)

source to hunt over without leasing or purchasing land. It's that simple, but I want to remind you once more that you must comply with all laws and regulations."

### Back-Up Plans

Even with a tactical approach, someone could learn about and beat

you to your plot. For that reason, you should consider having back-up spots. Ideally, these are places you've also planted in BowStand or Secret Spot.

"If you quietly access your deep-woods food plot, you might be looking at a 30 to 45-minute hike," Scott said. "That means you'll have an equal walk back to the vehicle if you find that someone is already hunting your spot, plus you'll face driving elsewhere and then hiking to a subsequent location. This kills a lot of time. Instead, try to locate and plant at least one back-up spot within a 15 to 20-minute walk from your primary location. That will provide an easy plan B so you can hunt an undisturbed area without having to travel as far and wasting time.

"Also, the Golden Rule applies well to situations where you find another hunter taking advantage of your hard work. No, it isn't nice that they're leveraging an easy ambush from your labor, but they have the equal right to be there. If you plan ahead and have a back-up spot or two, it becomes a smaller issue. Treat other hunters as you'd like to be treated."

### Credit Roll

If the public parcel you hunt can legally be planted, investing some effort to create a plot with Whitetail Institute's BowStand or Secret Spot can make your stand location more enticing to deer. You will be creating a deep-woods location that a mature buck can comfortably visit during daylight. It isn't a guarantee obviously, but it can be very effective. Why not be the next to send in a success story and photo? 🦌📸

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