

Nothing improves your chances for success when bowhunting whitetails more than adding small food plots to the right spots on your property. I call these staging area plots because deer tend to gather in these openings before venturing out to feed in larger ag fields nearby.

Since 1995, I have built more than 20 of these staging area plots on multiple properties. These spots have become the bread and butter of my whitetail bowhunting strategy because of how predictable they are to hunt. I love to keep these plots to an acre or smaller so any deer that comes into the plot will likely be within bow range at some point before it leaves.

You can build small plots the easy way, with heavy equipment, or do them on the cheap using only hand tools. I have done it both ways. In a recent issue of *Whitetail News*, I wrote an article about that approach: how to create poor-man-style food plots. It's even possible to create these small plots when you're hunting on permission ground, provided the rough openings are already there, requiring very little extra intrusion to open them up.

If that isn't enough to convince you of the effectiveness of staging area plots, I'll double down by offering three hunting stories, profiling the three biggest bucks I've shot over small plots during the almost 30 years I've been hunting them.

These are more than hunting stories. In fact, they are really food plot stories. I will detail how I created each of these plots and what I planted so you can improve your hunting area in the same way.

NOV. 5, 1997: A MASSIVE 8-POINTER

I shot this buck in early November 1997, only two years after I bought my first piece of land. The 2-acre plot began as a cornfield, but it had been abandoned and was overgrown with weeds and small trees. The deer density in that area was too high, and it forced the farmer to quit planting the spot. The deer had cleaned out the field every summer.

History had to factor heavily into my decision of what to plant. Typical farm crops such as corn or beans were obviously not an option. That left three choices: brassicas, cereal grain or clover. I decided on clover because it produces forage through a longer period than the other options.

I first sprayed the field and then drilled Imperial Whitetail Clover into the dying weeds and grasses with a no-till drill. I did that in Spring 1996, so by Summer 1997, the clover had completely taken hold and had become a super lush, highly attractive crop.

What was already a good spot — considering the fringe cover was a great funnel between big woods to the south and distant ag fields to the north — had become a dynamite kill zone. My friends and I killed a lot of nice bucks from the stand I placed on that fringe of cover. To this day, that stand ranks in the top two or three I've ever hunted.

Back to the morning of Nov. 5, 1997. I spotted a massive 8-pointer coming into the plot from the bigger timbered tract to the south. Part of the way across the plot, he picked up a young doe that was feeding. She was obviously very close to full estrus, because the buck chased and followed her around the plot for 30 minutes before they cut across the finger of timber to the north — just out of bow range — and headed west. As the doe fed in the open ridge to the west, the buck laid down and disappeared into the nearby switchgrass. It was soon obvious that he was sleep-

THREE FOOD PLOT BUCKS

Small staging area food plots are dynamite hunting spots, and these memorable whitetails prove that.

■ TEXT AND PHOTOS by Bill Winke

■ The author saw this buck in 2016 and 2018, but the deer had not made an appearance in 2019 before the day he shot it.





■ The author took this buck when it followed a hot doe into a narrow 1-acre food plot.

ing when the doe drifted off without him.

For the next three hours, I stared at that spot where the buck had disappeared until he finally stood back up, shook himself off and seemed to remember the doe. Thus began a full-scale assault on the nearby cover, as he feverishly looked for that doe like a bird dog on fresh pheasant scent.

Soon he found her, or another one like her, and as they ran circles playing tag, he made the mistake of swinging too close to my tree. I killed him with a 15-yard shot.

That buck remains one of the most massive-antlered and biggest-bodied bucks I have ever shot. It took two men, including me, just to barely slide his dead weight into the back of my truck.

It's that simple. Early in the rut, food plots serve as the meeting place for bucks and does. As the rut progresses, does learn to avoid those places, as they choose to hide in cover, avoiding constant harassment from every buck in the area. But early in the rut, an attractive food plot is a prime place to find a doe. During that time, we all know the formula: Find the does and you find the bucks.

NOV. 10, 2016: THE STORY OF SKINNY

A buck I nicknamed "Skinny" showed up mid-November 2015 about 300 yards down the hill from our house. He was a nice-looking 4-year-old (I guessed) but not a high-scoring deer. He had an impressive brahma bull look to his body, but he just didn't have the antlers to go with it.

But when he showed up the next summer at a nearby alfalfa field, he had the goods. Skinny (named for his long, thin tines) had become a showstopper. He had gotten a lot bigger and immediately became my No. 1 target.

There was a 1-acre field I had carved into the timber about a quarter-mile from where we had seen Skinny in 2015 and again in Summer 2016. Like the other spots on this list, the plot had come into the world humbly. It started as a rough opening in the timber where cattle had grazed for years. The spot was filled with hedge (Osage orange) trees and a few scattered cedars. With chainsaw in hand, I cut them off at the ground, and a food plot was born.

That plot seemed like a high-odds trap for Skinny, so I worked hard to make it as attractive as possible, fertilizing and liming the clover to the maximum of po-



■ The author took this buck while it was chasing a hot doe on the edge of a remote plot planted in Imperial Whitetail Clover. It was one of the first big bucks he shot on the edge of a food plot.

tential productivity. But alas, the best plans often go awry. I was thwarted by the weather. Summer finished very hot and dry, and the small ridgetop plot baked to a crispy brown, as the roots from nearby trees sucked up what little subsoil moisture remained. I ended up with a dirt plot covered with pods from a couple of nearby locust trees.

Deer didn't have a lot of good forage options on that part of the farm, so the opening and its coarse fare would have to do. What should have been a bright-green carpet of clover was now attractive only because it was an opening in an otherwise thickly covered ridge. Deer didn't use it as much as they would have had there been a better food source there, but they still used it.

I got off to a late start on the morning of Nov. 10, but the soft glow of pre-dawn light let me move fast and quiet. I made up time in transit and was settled soon after legal shooting time. Trail cameras told me that Skinny occasionally used that part of the farm, so the crusty opening was as likely a spot as any. Soon after daybreak, a doe popped out on the other end of the plot and headed my way. Skinny was 20 yards behind her.

What a sight. Those long tines and wide spread immediately took my breath away.

After Skinny followed the doe into the edge cover and back, I got a clean shot at him as he walked past at 30 yards. Here's where the story gets a little weird. When I stopped the buck with a mouth grunt, he turned to look my way. I was certain he would drop to run at the sound of the shot, so I aimed right at his brisket line, straight below the heart.

Instead of dropping, like all the other bucks I had seen in that situation, he just stood there like a statue until the arrow

skimmed hair off his brisket. Then, instead of blowing out in a mad dash, he

bounded a couple of times and stopped. He was looking up into the tree as I hastily grabbed another arrow and put it on the string. I aimed low again on the second shot, but that time, he dropped a half-foot, and the arrow hit true. The distraction of the rut and proximity of that hot doe surely dulled the buck's normal reaction time.

The shape of that plot was a big reason I killed that buck. It's about 150 yards long by 30 yards wide. Most deer walked the length of it, and as they came past the end where my stand hung, they were always in range. Like the first food plot stand I outlined, that plot also ranks among my all-time favorites and was very productive for bucks and does through the years.

OCT. 23, 2019: THE SURPRISE BUCK

There was an awesome-looking young buck hitting one of my food plots regularly in 2016. Believe it not, he looked to be a 140 inch 2-year-old. I had high hopes for him, but when he didn't show up the next year — while I was hunting that plot or on my trail cameras — I gave up on him. Then in 2018, after leaving the blind overlooking that plot, I spotted a really nice 10-pointer in a nearby field chasing a doe. He looked good, but I didn't recognize him as the same buck. He looked to be about 4 years old, though, which should have been a clue.

I decided in Spring 2019 that I needed to set up that area with plenty of food. That way, if the big 4-year-old was still there, I would have every opportunity to see (and maybe shoot) him.

The plot where I hoped to get my chance was a killer location. In fact, it might be the best setup I've ever hunted. Like the

first plot I discussed, this one started as a crop field, but when that part of the farm went into CRP, the previous owner kept the small 1-acre interior field out of the program so he could use it as a food plot.

I continued the tradition with only one small change: I didn't hunt the same big oak tree he had hunted, right where deer come out of the woods. Instead, I placed a Redneck Blind on the opposite side of the plot. Rather than have the deer come past me to enter plot, leaving me with no safe wind direction or exit option, I set up so they would have to work across the plot to get to me.

That simple change made it easy to keep deer from smelling me, and I only hunted when the wind blew from the plot toward me and then out over the open CRP field behind me. I could easily sneak out of the plot at the end of legal shooting time even with deer around because the blind was in a thick cedar fence line that separated the plot from the big CRP field. It was the perfect setup for undetected hunting, and I sat in that blind many times each season without deer becoming educated.

To make the spot even sweeter, the sur-

rounding cover was thick, and deer bedded in three directions, all but straight behind me. I couldn't have drawn up a better spot.

But one thing was missing: the buck. As the 2019 season arrived and I started hunting, I still had not seen any photos of the big 10-pointer anywhere on the farm. I assumed he had disappeared or maybe had died during the previous gun season.

By late October, I had forgotten completely about him and was just hunting the blind on the evening of Oct. 23 to give my other (presumably better) spots a break. Little did I know the surprise that was in store.

Right at sunset, a giant 10-pointer stepped out along the edge of the plot about 45 yards away and worked a scrape. At first, I didn't recognize him, but after a few seconds, the light bulb flashed on. It was the buck I had hoped to see all along, but he was much bigger now.

After working the scrape, he cut across the plot and stopped for a couple of bites of the brassicas. He seemed bent on heading out on a late-October tour of the farm. As he passed in front of the blind at

25 yards, I stopped him and made a clean shot to the lungs. He fell on the edge of the plot only seconds later.

I was shaking more on that buck than any I had shot in a long time. Not only was he a giant, but the shock value was real. I had given up on seeing him again, but he was lying dead just 120 yards away. What an evening, and what a buck.

As with the other bucks, that hunt was made possible by the 1-acre food plot I was hunting. I'm not saying I couldn't have killed that buck somewhere else had the plot not been there, but I have my doubts. Small plots such as that bottle-neck normal movement and make bow-hunting a lot more productive.

PROOF IN TRIPLICATE

Those bucks serve as my proof that these kinds of spots are as good as it gets. I still hunt timber trails and bedding areas every season, but time-tested staging area plots planted to Imperial Whitetail Clover or a brassica blend such as Winter-Greens are hard to beat.



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