



# A 3-STEP PROGRAM

## FOR HUNTING FOOD PLOTS

Using these adaptive seasonal approaches can put you in the right place to score a mature buck.

■ by *Scott Bestul*

PHOTO BY CHARLES J. ALSHEIMER

It made no sense for the buck to show up. Two hours before sunset during the Minnesota archery season opener, the temperature was 91. I've spent a good share of my life studying and writing about the behavior of mature bucks, and in that time, I've often said ambient air temperature has more to do with buck movement than any other factor.

In short, if it's really hot, big bucks generally don't move. Especially in the upper Midwest, where the difference between 70 degrees and 90 is like opposite sides of the sun.

Still, my buddy Alan was determined to hunt the Whitetail Institute Imperial Clover food plot. In the 10 days preceding the archery opener, a buck we called "The Flyer" had been a frequent visitor to the plot.

"I have almost zero free time, and I'm just going to have to hunt that buck whenever I can and wherever the wind is right," Alan said.

So I dropped him off at the stand we'd hung there, and with almost 45 minutes until dark, The Flyer appeared in the clover and fed within bow range of my friend. Only a few steps separated the mature buck from Alan taking a perfect shot when another buck appeared and walked up to The Flyer for a sparring session. The two duked it out for several minutes and, just when a shot seemed certain, the pair separated, and The Flyer walked straight away presenting no lethal opportunity.

### **HUNTING FOOD PLOTS EFFECTIVELY: A THREE-PRONGED APPROACH**

I'd love to tell you this crazy early-season hunting story ended with a monster buck tagged by one of my best friends. I can't testify to that, but it proves the attraction of food plots to mature whitetails to the point that even when conditions are far from ideal, they can get a buck on his feet to feed.

But don't make the mistake of thinking access to easy, quality food makes a buck stupid. In fact, of the many potential ways to tag a mature whitetail, sitting over a food plot can be one of the toughest. And I say that having tak-

en my biggest archery whitetail by doing that. But deer are vulnerable when they feed, and being a prey species, they know feeding is risky business. To make matters worse, many hunters are more attracted to food plots than the deer they're trying to feed, so they habitually overhunt them. This double-whammy makes food plot hunting something that has to be done carefully and thoughtfully. Here's the three-step process we've come to use.

### **EARLY-SEASON SNIPING**

Other than the post-rut/early-winter time frame, the first weeks of the early archery season are perhaps the best time to kill a buck over food. Still on their summer feeding patterns in most areas, whitetails are pretty much slaves to their stomachs and are reasonably predictable. To further sweeten the pot, bucks haven't been hunted for months, so they're as relaxed as they'll be for months.

But the window on that time frame closes by the day for three reasons. First, natural foods — acorns, soft mast and others — will be ripening and distracting the attention of deer from food plots and farm fields. Second, bucks are losing (or have lost) velvet, and bachelor groups are breaking up as bucks disperse, making previous train-track predictable deer seemingly disappear. And finally, human pressure starts to increase as hunting seasons open and other fall activities ramp up. Suddenly, deer that haven't been bothered by people might see, smell and hear them frequently. I'm convinced that although you might be the only person hunting a property, deer notice the uptick in human activity in the general neighborhood and — especially mature animals — respond by moving more cautiously and more after dark.

The key to responding to that is to put as little pressure on food plots as possible, paying special attention to proper wind direction, entry and exit. And unless trail cams prove otherwise, I limit my hunts to evening sits, as the odds of bumping deer heading back to bed during a morning hunt soar in the

early season. I also try to arrange for someone to pick me up in a vehicle or ATV at the end of an evening sit whenever possible. If you start bumping deer feeding in or hanging nearby a food plot by climbing out of a stand or blind, they will shift to other food sources or only come at night. Finally, do your best to time early-season hunts to approaching cold fronts or weather systems. Bucks that skulk back in cover during an extended warm spell will often run into a food plot an hour before dark if the temp drops 20 degrees or a gentle rain suddenly breaks a drought.

### **RE-ROUTE FOR THE RUT**

The annual whitetail rut, every deer hunter's favorite phase of fall, represents one of the toughest periods to kill a buck over a food plot, in my experience. For starters, bucks with does on the brain just don't eat much, so waiting on food for a hungry whopper to show up on his own can involve a lot of waiting and not much killing. Second, hunting seasons have been in full swing for several months, and bucks — mature deer, anyway — are increasingly reluctant to poke their nose into open areas where they know they're vulnerable.

I know what you're thinking. "What about does that are eager to feed that drag a buck right into your (food plot) lap?" Yup. That happens, and it's happened to me. But when I look back at the good bucks I've tagged through the years, I've shot only a handful directly on a food plot during the rut.

But here's the kicker. The area just off a food source can be dynamite during the breeding season, and here's why: Does are, of course, totally tuned into and familiar with every food plot in their home range. And they will continue to revisit those spots throughout fall. Bucks, especially mature deer, are tuned in to where does are active and will always check those areas, including food plots, on a constant basis as the rut unfolds. The trick is, most of that checking is done just off and typically downwind of those feeding spots.

So, if you want to shoot a big whitetail orienting toward food plots, you

need to mimic their behavior. Rather than plopping right on the plot, scout off away from the edge. You're looking for perimeter trails that parallel the edge of the plot. These are trails used most by mature bucks so they can scent-check the plot for does without walking in the plot. I've actually watched mature bucks tending a hot doe, and even when his girlfriend walked into the plot

to grab a bite, the buck would hang back and keep track of her by watching from a perimeter trail or adjoining thick cover. In many of those examples, I'd have never seen or certainly not had a lethal shot at those bucks if my view had been limited to the food plot.

Although perimeter or skirting trails are rarely as easy to spot as an entry trail, rubs and scrapes usually indicate their presence, and after I figure out a stand tree, I create one or more mock scrapes to spice up the setup. It can be tough to pull away from sitting directly on a food plot, especially when it's a safe bet you won't see as many deer. But if the deer you see is the right one, it's worth the move.

## LATE-SEASON GREATNESS

Every year when we're knocking out the season's food plots — applying lime and fertilizer, working dirt and seeding, mowing and spraying — we do so with the realization that hunting that plot might involve a handful of days during our late bow and blackpowder seasons. But that tiny window of time is worth every ounce of our efforts, as some of the best bucks killed by our group have come during that period.

In many ways, this is a perfect example of the season coming full circle. In the first weeks of our early archery season, effective hunting means knowing what deer eat. Late season is all that and then some. All whitetails are hungry in the post-rut, and bucks are particularly ravenous — to the point where we annually have encounters with bucks we've never seen during three months of hunting. And although plenty of hunters dismiss the importance of the secondary



## IMPERIAL WHITETAIL BEETS & GREENS

- Contains Whitetail Institute's proprietary WINA 210K kale, Tall Tine Turnips, and WINA 412 radish. Includes sugar beets to produce even more sweet attractiveness.
- Annual: Up to 36% protein.

### Optimum Growing Environment:

- Soil Type: For medium-to well-drained soils
- Soil pH: 6.0 to 7.5
- Sunlight: 4 to 6 hours of of broken, filtered or direct sunlight a day



rut, I've seen enough breeding behavior in December to know it's a significant motivator for daylight buck movement. In fact, just two winters ago, I watched a buck we called "Cheetos" barge into a food plot an hour before dusk following a hungry yearling doe. We had not captured a daylight picture of Cheetos on that plot, though he was a regular visitor. The doe was the trigger-tripper for that buck.

Of course, this is no slam dunk. First, you must have enough plots planted in the right mixes to be the most effective. Quantity of plots is important because having several lets you spread out hunting efforts and hopefully adjust to varying wind directions. Quality food is critical, because if something tastier and more abundant is growing in the neighborhood, that's where the bucks will be. I've always had great luck with Winter-Greens, but Beets & Greens, Tall Tine Tubers and, this past year, Ravish Radish have also sucked deer.

Spreading out effort is critical because there is no other time of the season when whitetails are so spooky. After several months of archery, an intense firearms hunt and, in most states, a muzzleloader season, local deer have been through the wringer. There is no curiosity in them, and the slightest sound, sight or scent that hints at humans will catch their attention. And I've become convinced that no matter how careful you are during this time, each hunt leaves an impression on a plot. Whether it's the sound of your exit at dusk, some residual scent from boot tracks or the sight of your silhouette disappearing over a ridge as you depart, you're being noticed, and the chances of deer hitting that plot during

shooting hours dim by the day. Rotating hunts between several plots keeps them as fresh as possible.

Also, as with the early season, I hunt directly on the food source. We usually have one blind close to the middle of the food plot, assuming the prevailing wind direction allows such placement. But because we've had funkier and weirder winds lately, I've learned to place tree stands on entry trails. I'll be honest: I'm totally aware how deadly an elevated blind in a food plot can be, but I really don't like hunting them that much. I think I'm getting a little claustrophobic in my old age? Whatever the reason, I tend to like stands better. I might miss some shot opportunities I would have had in a blind, but I like my stands.

On a final note, we've learned through hard experience that temperatures during this time are critical, and the colder the better. For example, if it's been 30 degrees but it suddenly cools to 15, drop everything you're doing and hunt. However, if it's been minus 5 and it suddenly climbs to 15 degrees, whitetails feel like they're on a beach sipping umbrella drinks and move accordingly. So, pay attention to fronts and systems, and get out there to take advantage of any forecasted big snow or Alberta Clipper. Dressing in every layer you have and waddling to a food plot can seem soul-crushing until that whopper buck steps out and makes you forget everything else.