



FOOD PLOTS FOR

# LATE- SEASON SUCCESS

If you don't fill your tag during the early season or the rut, follow these tips to increase your chances during the season's final days.

■ by *Darron McDougal*



PHOTO BY CHARLES J. ALSHEIMER

Every whitetail hunter is motivated differently, but I think we can agree that most (there are exceptions) deer hunters would choose the rut if given only one week to hunt. If polled on their least favorite time to hunt, most would say the late season (with the exception of a few Southern states, where the rut occurs during the late season.) That's because temperatures are cold and late-season bucks are incredibly difficult to kill. They are more nocturnal and typically shift from early-season food sources to winter groceries for survival. If your hunting property has no such foods, you can expect many unproductive hours on stand while freezing your butt off.

If you have property, though, you can add a late-season food source to keep deer around. Ideally, you'll fill your tag over a lush Imperial Whitetail Clover plot earlier in the season, but when things don't go as planned, having late-season food can put you in the game during the season's home stretch. The additional thought, planning and labor you put in now can pay huge antler and venison dividends during early winter, when most hunters have already succeeded or thrown the white flag. And remember, sometimes the last man standing gets the biggest buck.

Although any food plot designed for late-season whitetail forage can boost your odds, you can address some specifics to optimize your late-season hunting potential. Here are some points to help you cultivate ideal late-season food sources so you have a fighting chance at filling your tag before time runs out.

## LOCATIONS AND SIZE

After surviving hunting pressure during the early season and rut, deer require more security cover during the late season than at other times. Because leaves and other foliage have fallen and wilted, look for thickets, fallen evergreens, cedar swamps, pine plantations and other cover-rich areas at your property or an adjoining area. Deer also rely on terrain features that give them the home-field advantage of smelling or seeing danger before it becomes a threat. Knowing where deer bed during the late season will help you best locate your plot.



Christi Self's buck was a regular at the Winter-Greens plot about a week before the Alabama season closed.

PHOTO BY BRANDON SELF

When you identify likely bedding areas deer feel safe using during the late season, map out potential late-season plot locations that will offer hunting opportunities based on prevailing winds. It does no good to put in a late-season food plot you cannot hunt when a cold-front blows in because of poor wind directions. You'll be happy you didn't overlook this step.

Brandon Self, director of operations for the Whitetail Institute, suggested not encroaching too much on a bedding area with your food plot.

"You don't want to go too close to bedding," he said. "If you do, any commotion you make while accessing and exiting the area could bump deer. Give yourself some room from the bedding area, and then try to locate the plot somewhere between a destination perennial food source and that bedding area. This will create discreet access when you hunt, but you'll be close enough to the bedding area so that you'll catch deer moving during daylight."

If that location coincides with an early-season annual food plot, supplement the early-season forage with a late-season annual to keep deer returning to that location all season.

As far as size, it's obvious that a large plot will likely attract and hold more deer, but not everyone has enough acreage or equipment to make that happen. That's OK. Do the best you can with what you have.

"Late-season plots can be micro-sized, but if you can provide half an acre or more, that will work really well," Self said.

"Whitetail Institute's fall annuals have high tonnage and can provide a lot of food."

## PLANTINGS

In most regions, corn and soybeans are very attractive food sources because of their high carbohydrate content. These plantings are ideal for larger fields, but so are brassicas such as the Whitetail Institute's Imperial Whitetail Winter-Greens. Ravish Radish and Tall Tine Tubers are other great plantings for larger fields and will attract and hold deer during the late season.

"Any of our products that have tubers underground are very popular with deer during the late season," Self said. "Tall Tine Tubers, Beets & Greens and Ravish Radish are all very effective. Once other crops are gone, deer will start digging those tubers from the ground and eating them. Those products provide the carbohydrates deer seek when it's really cold."

If you want to plant a remote plot you cannot access with big equipment, or if you simply have a small property and minimal equipment, look to BowStand or Secret Spot, which are fall annuals tailored for smaller plots and minimal soil preparation. I've written about these products before, and they simplify the food-plotting picture. Plus, they provide vital forages for late-season hunting.

## TIMING

Planting dates for late-season food plots vary by region. In cold climates, frost is a



## GETTING IN AND OUT OF LATE-SEASON PLOTS

■ Accessing food plots during the late season is tricky business. December and January deer are edgier than at any other point in the season. If a plot is somewhat near a bedding area, one false move can wreck your hunt and even the remainder of the season. When planning your late-season plots, always consider access options. Do everything you can to make entry and exit as seamless and quiet as possible.

Also, your method of entry and exit are equally important. If your plot is remote, hiking in on foot is likely your only option. When hunting along farm-field edges, being dropped off and picked up by someone in a truck or tractor works well. You're far better in most cases to bump deer off a food source with a vehicle or tractor rather than trying to sneak in or out on foot.

central factor. Of course, we don't know the exact date frost will arrive, but based on historical averages, you have a decent idea. The goal is plant well in advance.

"For the best results, you'll want the plots to get 60 to 90 days of growth before frost hits," Self said. "In the South, planting could happen as late as September or October. In the North, planting is usually best done late in July or the beginning of August. Again, shoot for 60 to 90 days before frost, and your plot will hold up just fine."

### RESERVE IT FOR LATER

If you have enough property and multiple food plots throughout, you might consider saving one or two specifically for the late season, hunting them sparingly or saving them until the last few weeks of the season. Of course, that's if you don't run trail cameras. You'd be foolish not to hunt a plot if a shooter buck frequents it during daylight. But the goal is to keep a plot or two nearly pressure-free.

"You obviously don't want to overhunt any of your food plots," Self said. "I don't think you necessarily need to avoid hunting one until the late season, but I believe there's merit to hunting it less than your other plots. What you plant will complement that strategy. If you plant tubers, deer most often won't hit them hard until after frost hits. Naturally, this allows you to hunt your other early-season plots throughout the fall and then transition to your Winter-Greens and Tall Tine Tubers as deer begin hitting them really hard after frost."

### THE END GOAL

When planning and planting a late-season food plot, the goal is to attract and

hold deer on your property so you have a great chance at filling your tag before the buzzer.

Self's wife, Christi, recently experienced the benefits of a late-season plot when she took her first deer.

"The hunt unfolded about a week before the 2020-2021 Alabama season closed on a clover field mixed with Winter-Greens," Self said. "All season, the deer had been eating the Imperial Whitetail Clover, but when the frost came later in the season, they started hammering the brassicas. The buck Christi took had been frequenting the field — I'd seen him on my Moultrie trail camera. He'd been coming in with a doe and two yearlings just about every morning.

We'd left that field alone and went in on a Saturday morning. Sure enough, the doe came out with her two yearlings first, and then the buck came out last and gave her a shot opportunity. Again, it was those Winter-Greens that kept the deer coming to that field so late in the season."

### REFLECTIONS

With the onslaught of cold weather and the obvious need to feed, even giant bucks can be susceptible to a killer late-season food plot. Plus, after rut-related hunting pressure fizzles, major cold fronts will put deer on their feet, often during daylight. The question is, will they be munching carbohydrate-rich forages in your well-conceived late-season plot, or will they leave your property to find those carb-high foods on someone else's property? The answer depends on the planning, preparation and effort you invest two to three months before the frost hits.



### IMPERIAL WHITETAIL WINTER-GREENS

- Brassica mix designed for late-season hunting and as a late-season food source. Contains proprietary WINA kale and Tall Tine Tubers.
- Annual: Valuable nutrient source for winter.

#### Optimum Growing Environment:

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

