



USING FOOD PLOTS TO  
**MAXIMIZE  
OPPORTUNITIES**  
TO KILL MATURE BUCKS

Bucks don't get old by acting impulsively.  
Learn how mature deer act differently than their younger peers —  
and how to take advantage of those traits.

■ by *Gerald Almy*

**O**ld bucks are different. That's a common statement from veteran hunters. But truthfully, few novice hunters and food plotters really understand how profoundly different mature bucks are from 1- to 3-year-old deer.

Animals 4 and older are like a separate species. After a whitetail reaches that breakoff-point, it becomes reclusive, super-wary, often nocturnal and maddeningly difficult to hunt. But knowing how old-timers behave differently from younger deer, and how they use the land and its topography and vegetation, can provide solid clues about how to manage your food plots and surrounding habitat to improve your success on these senior citizens.

Let's look at some examples of behavioral and personality differences between young bucks and mature animals. Then, we'll discuss how being constantly aware of these differences as you plan, lay out and maintain food plots can help increase your chances of wrapping your hands around the bases of a few of these boss bucks — or trying to, if those bases aren't too massive to grip.

## **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN OLD AND YOUNG BUCKS**

For a mature buck, survival is the No. 1 goal — even more important than sex and eating. That information will go a long way toward guiding how you approach food plot planning, location and execution.

Mature bucks move out of their beds later in the day, usually just before dark, or when hunters aren't in the woods, often about noon. They can become nocturnal quickly. Old bucks are on a hair-trigger to move mostly at night or hunker down in remote, inaccessible areas if they feel the slightest pressure at food plots or other food sources.

Mature bucks make the earliest rubs and mark the largest-diameter trees. They make the earliest scrapes. They often travel harder physical topographic routes (steeper, with thicker cover) than females and young deer if it will keep them out of sight of hunters or provide security. They choose routes based on cover and a sense of safety.

Old bucks bed in remote areas, often

in elevated terrain. They can spook when one of their senses detects danger — a snapped twig (hearing), a hunter moving through an opening in the woods or across a field (vision) or a whiff of human odor blowing toward them (smell). A younger deer will be alarmed by one sense but might continue its activities after pausing. An old buck will vanish like a wisp of fog if one sense of danger is activated.

Though increasing testosterone levels in fall urge them to chase does, they often forgo that courting act, hanging out in cover during the pre-rut and only moving in to mate after does go fully into heat.

Some mature bucks take that step farther, forgoing breeding. Wildlife biologists have documented some old, reclusive bucks that opted out of mating to avoid the dangers of exposing themselves to hunters.

## **THE HUNTER'S OPENING**

Although they live cautious, secretive lives and are easily spooked, old bucks have an Achilles' heel: They have to eat. And they are inordinately fond of lush, tender forage in a food plot. That's our route to harvest these wary bucks. But it takes great care and prudence to not spook or alert them that they're being hunted. Here are some ideas on how to do that, based on 35 years of growing food plots and managing the surrounding habitat to attract and shoot old bucks. The steps involve many facets, including planning, plot layout, habitat manipulation, plot maintenance and other factors.

## **AVOID PRESSURING THEM**

This is one of the most crucial steps to harvest older deer. Mature bucks bed in some of the roughest areas possible, with steep terrain and thickets of briars and tangled brush. Never pressure those areas, which you can locate via spring scouting and studying aerial photographs and topographic maps.

Similarly, you don't want to pressure mature bucks when they visit the plots you grow to attract and help nurture those deer. However, you want to mon-

itor them when possible, to see when bucks visit the plot and where they enter. Game cameras serve that vital purpose and let you study the racks and bodies of bucks to make sure they're mature. You can monitor some plots (those used mainly for nutrition) with trail cams using SD cards, but wireless setups let you keep tabs on smaller, remote plots you hope will attract mature bucks without human pressure.

"Our cellular system gives hunters 24-7 access to their trail camera images without ever stepping in the woods to retrieve SD cards," said Mark Olis, content director for Moultrie Mobile. "You can be sitting in your home, truck or at work — wherever — and view your trail camera images from the field. This is not only convenient, but it keeps you from disturbing your best hunting areas.

"Older bucks are reclusive and will not tolerate much, if any, disturbance in their home area, which hopefully includes your food plot. A cellular camera positioned near the feeding area is an ideal setup to keep pressure low while continually gaining insight into his movements. Then, when the buck begins showing a daytime pattern on your cell camera, you can enter the area to hunt and hopefully harvest him."

## **DON'T HUNT THEM TOO OFTEN**

This is related to the aforementioned advice. Only hunt a plot when a mature buck is using it and conditions are favorable. Hunting too often or when conditions aren't perfect can ruin your chance of killing a monster buck. Some people pride themselves on doggedly hunting stands "all day every day for weeks." That shows stamina, but it's usually a poor formula for killing a wary buck.

Use your trail cameras, and note the barometer conditions, and wind direction and speed when a keeper buck visits the plot. Plan your hunt for similar conditions. Make that first hunt count. If you don't succeed, don't go back the next day unless conditions are perfect again.

I learned that lesson again recently when I saw a heavy, symmetrical 8-pointer out of bow range one afternoon. Pumped up by the big deer, I tried

again the next day, overlooking a change in weather conditions. And I paid the price. I did not see the deer that day, and I might have spooked him. I never saw him again the rest of the season. Fortunately, he returned as a 9-pointer the next fall. Remembering to keep a low-pressure approach, I was lucky to kill him with my muzzleloader near the same plot.

### OFFER SOMETHING SPECIAL OR DIFFERENT FROM SURROUNDING CROP FIELDS

This is easy in most cases with Whitetail Institute products, as the main crops farmers grow are usually soybeans, corn and alfalfa. Ag soybeans can be susceptible to overbrowsing. By the time corn appeals to deer, it's usually being harvested. And the alfalfa farmers grow becomes more tough at maturity compared to browsing alfalfa varieties making them less palatable, digestible and attractive to deer.

Offer Imperial Whitetail Clover, Fusion, Extreme, Alfa-Rack Plus or some of the Institute's annuals, and they'll attract deer. They're highly palatable and stand out from surrounding ag fields with more tender forage than field corn, bean leaves and hay alfalfa. The company's fall and winter brassica products are especially good choices because brassicas are seldom grown on surrounding farm agricultural fields. Imperial Winter-Greens, Beets & Greens and Tall Tine Tubers are good selections that offer something different from farm fields. Ravish Radish, a recent addition, attracts deer in early season even before frosts convert starches in these plants to sugars.

### AVOID TIME GAPS IN FORAGE OFFERINGS

If deer encounter periods when they don't have thriving forage on your land — or preferably several types — they might move to adjoining properties where they find a buffet. After Whitetail Oats Plus and Winter-Greens start fading in spring, make sure you have Imperial Whitetail Clover, Fusion or Alfa Rack Plus available.

Those perennials cover late winter



### IMPERIAL WHITETAIL ALFA-RACK PLUS

- Contains high-protein browsing alfalfa, exclusive WINA Chicory and Imperial Whitetail Clover
- Perennial: Last up to five years from a single planting
- Up to 44% protein
- Optimum Growing Environment:**
  - Soil Type: For medium- to well-drained upland type soils
  - Soil pH: 6.5-7.5
  - Sunlight: 4 to 6 hours of broken, filtered or direct sunlight a day
  - Can be planted in spring or fall

LINK: <https://bit.ly/3uv6gD3>



through early spring. After that, you can add a summer annual offering. I've yet to find anything that tops Power Plant. It includes select cowpeas and forage soybeans, plus sunn hemp and sunflowers that serve as nurse crops and add structure for beans and peas to climb, as well as offering additional food. As Power Plant starts to fade in fall, clover and alfalfa plots, and new fall plantings of brassicas and oats, will take over. You can even mow trails into Power Plant and sow those with a brassica such as Winter-Greens to bridge the transition from summer forage to fall crops. Offering those forages prevents gaps in your food and offers variety, which is important because some deer prefer one type food to another.

### MAINTAIN YOUR PLOTS

If nearby properties have well-kept food plots and yours are run down, choked with weeds or lacking nutrients, can you guess where deer will go? Recently, I was laid up for a while after major back surgery. Unwilling to risk damaging my rebuilt back, which included three titanium rods and seven fused vertebrae, while it healed, I let my plots deteriorate.

That fall, I paid the price and saw fewer mature bucks, because I couldn't mow the perennial plots regularly, spray them with Arrest Max and Slay for grasses and weeds, or conduct other maintenance chores. Seeing fewer bucks as I recuperated was bad enough. Worse was hearing that my neighbor harvested an impressive 4-year old I had watched on my plots the previous year when I was taking care of the forage. Sure, part of me was happy for him. But another part wished that deer was still around, and I

would have liked to see what he looked like at 4.

Always conduct a soil test before planting, and add necessary lime and fertilizers. Lime is especially important if your pH is less than 6.5. With soil that's acidic, many nutrients and fertilizers in the ground become bound together, and growing plants cannot absorb them. You're wasting money if you pour on N-P-K but fail to get pH in the 6.5 to 7 range ideal for most food plot products.

After forages are strongly established and growing well, maintain the perennial plots of alfalfa, chicory and clover with periodic mowing when the plants are going to flower or weeds stand taller than the forage. But never cut them shorter than 5 to 6 inches. Spray with Arrest Max and Slay if mowing can't control weeds and grasses.

Finally, consider adding nitrogen, such as 34-0-0 or 46-0-0, to your brassicas a few weeks after they emerge. That extra shot of urea makes those plants more palatable and boosts growth, making them especially attractive to an old buck.

### PROVIDE MATURE BUCKS WITH SECURITY

A mature buck bedding in a remote, thick spot will typically not approach a food plot in daylight unless he has cover as he nears the plot and moves into it. If the plot is surrounded by woods, hinge-cutting or completely cutting some low-value trees along the approach route can help. You can even channel the buck's movement to approach upwind of a stand in shooting range by how you pile brush and cut trees.

If there's an open area deer must cross, you can plant shrubs or native warm-season grasses. But those are slow growing. Whitetail Institute recently re-

leased a great product for that situation: Conceal. It's a blend of sunn hemp and proprietary sorghums you can only get from the company. It grows thick and tall quickly to offer a screen for you to sneak into a plot or for older bucks to feel comfortable approaching in daylight. Having strips and blocks of Conceal will make deer travel more freely in daylight and arrive at food plots earlier. You can even plant strips that run right into the plot, luring deer into bow range.

### NEVER HUNT A PLOT DURING POOR CONDITIONS

We covered this to some extent, but it bears repeating. The key to avoid using a stand under unfavorable conditions is simple: Have enough other food plots and stands that lend themselves to hunting during various wind or hunting pressure conditions. Have some that hunt well during winds from any direction.

You're fooling yourself if you try to cheat the wind. I've tried that several times, but one of the biggest nontypicals I've ever seen caught my scent when I thought an iffy wind was good enough to hunt a stand near an Alabama food plot. The unique buck approached the

plot and was almost in the clear for a shot when that wind revealed itself as bad. Vamoose.

Don't break that rule like I did, costing me a chance at a remarkable deer. Never hunt a plot when conditions are unfavorable. When the wind, weather fronts, nearby hunting pressure or other conditions are wrong for a mature buck to use a plot in daylight without scenting you, or without your scent blowing toward him as you approach the plot, dismiss the temptation to hunt it. Or if it's a weekend with good weather but you expect lots of hunter activity at surrounding areas, hold off on hunting your best spot. Bucks tend to move nocturnally during those high-pressure days.

Sometimes, you can overcome bad winds by having two stands on opposite sides of a plot. Choose the one that blows your scent downwind from where trail cameras show a buck is using the area.

Don't abandon locations that seem unhuntable. They're still valuable for keeping deer on your property and helping their nutritional needs. And the next time you plan and lay out a plot, consider where bedding areas, likely buck

approach routes, the angle of the sun, prevailing wind conditions and whether the site is secluded enough for a mature buck to use. If you address those initially, you should be able to hunt every plot you create.

Also, you can hunt travel routes to and from unhuntable plots. A cellular trail camera can help you locate good spots without pushing deer off the area by constantly checking SD cards.

### CONCLUSION

Try these tips for planning, creating, fine tuning and managing food plots for mature bucks. Hopefully, they will help you lure an exceptional buck into range for a clean shooting opportunity.

It's difficult to ask for more than that.



# Get the Right Equipment for Your Plot

## Lime Spreaders & Tilling Machines





- spread pulverized or pelletized lime
- ground driven system dispenses evenly
- made of heavy gauge sheet metal
- heavy duty tires and wheels
- three models - 500 lb to 2000 lb.
- tractor and ATV models



- excellent ground preparation implement
- quickly tears up old growth and creates the best seedbed for food plots
- strong steel frame with many options
- change angle of disc blades easily
- tractor and ATV models



GroundBuster

"Making it Greener on Your Side"

JR Metal: GroundBusters • [www.groundbusters.com](http://www.groundbusters.com)

52 Hess Road, Leola, PA 17540 • (717) 656-6241

Call today and learn how our equipment can save time and money!