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INDIANA SUCCESS:

SMALL PARCEL, BIG BUCKS

With four bruiser bucks in four seasons, Gary Padgett Jr. is proof that smart management and careful hunting pay big dividends.

■ by Gordy Krahn

In some respects, Gary C. Padgett Jr. thinks small when it comes to killing big bucks. That is, he does it repeatedly on a 40-acre farm he owns. And he's a prime example of how bigger isn't always better when it comes to managing properties that grow and hold trophy-caliber deer — proof that it's not necessary to own hundreds or even thousands of acres to be successful in the whitetail game. And that's not just because he owns the “right” 40 acres. It's also a result of the work he's done developing and managing that ground.

Like a lot of youngsters, when it came to hunting, Padgett started small and worked his way up — his father a big influence on his initiation.

“My dad wasn't a deer hunter, but he would take me rabbit and squirrel hunting and fishing almost every weekend,” Padgett said. “As I got older, a friend and his dad introduced me to deer hunting, and I shot my first buck and doe with a 12-gauge Mossberg 500 almost 24 years ago. Eventually, I was able to buy the farm where I shot those deer and was blessed to share time developing it and hunting there with my dad during his final years.

“Dad was a God-fearing, loving man. He passed away Dec. 19, 2021 — health complications from a stroke he suffered four years ago. His last day hunting was opening weekend of gun season this past fall with my brother. We went to the same property where Dad took us on our first hunt. I have no words to express my feelings but was very blessed to share those memories with my dad.”

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Padgett's formula for managing the properties he hunts isn't complicated. He simply gives resident deer everything they could want or need.

“I plant acres of beans, corn, clover, alfalfa — the list goes on and on,” he said.

“Basically, I want to give them a buffet. My goal is to provide them with food they might not find elsewhere.”

Padgett delivers the one-two-three punch of food, water, and minerals to keep his deer fat and happy. In addition to the corn and beans he plants on the property, he implements a variety of Whitetail Institute products to round out the smorgasbord.

“My farm is roughly 40 acres,” he said.



IMPERIAL WHITETAIL ALFA-RACK® PLUS UP TO 44 PERCENT PROTEIN

- Perennial three- to five-year longevity.
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- Features WINA Chicory, specifically selected for food plots. More tender and palatable, less waxy and more attractive to whitetails than chicories traditionally planted for deer. Can be planted alone or overseeded into existing forages.



“About 13 acres of it is hardwoods, and the rest is an old agricultural field, [some of it] transformed into food plots.”

In those plots, Padgett plants a combination of Imperial Whitetail Clover, Alfa Rack Plus, Pure Attraction and the chicory blend Chic Magnet, which he says deer really like.

Imperial Whitetail Clover contains an extremely high protein content critical for antler, muscle, and bone growth in bucks. Whitetail does use the much-needed nutrition to help deliver healthier fawns and produce more milk. Alfa Rack Plus is a perennial designed to produce an extensive deep-root structure that helps plants thrive on hilltops and hillsides. It features grazing alfalfas that are high in protein, are drought- and cold tolerant, have more leaf relative to stem, and are more palatable to deer than ordinary hay alfalfas. An annual, Imperial Pure Attraction provides abundant, nutritious forage for fall and winter that grows rapidly and is extremely attractive to deer in the early and late hunting seasons. Chic Magnet, an attractive, drought-resistant, perennial forage with incredible attraction power, can be planted alone, mixed with other seeds or overseeded into existing forages to provide gains in variety, attractiveness, and drought resistance.

Mineral sites laced with Imperial Whitetail 30-06 complete Padgett's deer buffet. This mineral/vitamin blend delivers essential macro and trace minerals along with vitamins A, D and E, which are needed for a healthy herd and for bucks to reach more of their genetic potential in antler growth. It contains high-quality minerals and vitamins and, according to Padgett, is a deer magnet. “I added mineral sites on the farm several years ago, and it has really made a huge difference,” he said. “The 30-06 is a big draw. The season here in Indiana ends Jan. 31, so I don't start putting mineral sites out until February, and I do that the first of every month until the following season. By Indiana law, I have to pull my mineral sites for hunting season.”

But the final piece to the puzzle is that Padgett keeps human activity to a minimum on the properties he hunts in the form of deer safe zones. “I have some sanctuaries that particular bucks go into, and that's where they live and where they bed,” he said. “I consider this is a no man's land — stay out of it, no

questions asked. I realize that a lot of these deer don't live here on my property, [but] sometimes they do. They're free ranging, and they come and go, and it's something you can't control. But if I keep the pressure off of them and don't overhunt it, I stand a better chance of them sticking around."

Padgett said he can't control what his neighbors do, but by providing a deer a safe house, external hunting pressure can actually work to his advantage. "It's tough," he said. "I do have some hunting pressure, and not everybody's on the same page when it comes to deer management, so on my small parcel, I try not to put pressure on [the deer]. I have the food. I have the water. I have the minerals. And I have the sanctuary. Everybody else is pushing them off their property, and I benefit from that."

CATCH 'EM EARLY

Padgett said the early season is a good time to catch bucks unaware. "I like to hunt them early, when they're still in their summer pattern," he said. "It's the best window of opportunity — that and the last week of November."

And for Padgett, that usually means targeting a specific buck — one that's been frequenting the food plots and mineral sites he monitors with trail cameras.

"So once I start seeing a particular buck that I want to go after, he goes on my personal hit list, and that's the one I focus on."

In 2020, Padgett had connected on a huge buck he called "Big Leu." So, when the 2021 bow season rolled around, there was no reason to doubt he had a good chance to repeat, having gathered a lot of intelligence on a hit-list nontypical buck he named "T6" because of its funky brow tine configuration. "I watched this deer all summer long in the food plots and at a mineral site," he said. "I knew exactly where he was [spending his time]. I knew how he lived, and just like Big Leu, I knew his exact patterns."

On the morning of Sept. 19, 2021, Padgett sat perched on a ladder stand overlooking an area between a creek and the buck's bedding area. "Actually, I wasn't even going to hunt this stand that morning because the wind direction wasn't right," he said. "But it changed overnight, so I went in and set up, knowing where T6 typically liked to bed. It was a nice



cool, clear morning. The temperature was probably in the 50s. I had a pretty good idea where this buck was traveling from food to bedding, and that there was good potential that he would show up."

At daybreak, a bachelor group of four bucks appeared. "One was about 110 inches, and the others were scrubbers," Padgett said. "They were just messing around, doing what they do." But then movement to the side caught the hunter's eye.

"I was just watching those four bucks, and then all of a sudden, my hit-list buck shows up," he said. "This really surprised me because I hadn't seen him with those other bucks before on camera. T6 just walked around the corner and started sparring with one of the other bucks."

As the huge buck walked in, Padgett waited patiently for a shot opportunity, which finally came when the buck closed the distance to 41 yards. "When T6 came around the corner, I knew exactly what he was," he said. "I waited for a broadside shot, drew back my bow and made the shot."

Including Big Leu the previous year, T6 in 2021, a buck named "Big 11" in 2019 and a huge 8.5-year-old called "Tank" he shot during 2018, Padgett has killed four trophy bucks in four years. And what does the Indiana hunter consider a trophy buck?

"To be honest, I haven't even scored T6," Padgett said. "I used to get caught up in that, but I've kind of gotten over that stage of deer hunting. I know what a trophy is — what a mature buck is — and that's what I look for. This particular buck was 5.5 years old and had 17 scorable points. When I saw him this year, he really grabbed my interest, and I focused on him during the early bow season."

For Padgett, hunting whitetails is more about the experience than inches of antler.

"As a hunter, I am very passionate about everything I do," he said. "Bowhunting, deer management, building food plots and helping friends who have those same dreams of killing big bucks — that's what matters most to me."



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