

Warm Season Food Plantings for Deer

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Planting food plots for deer is very popular among Alabama's deer hunters. Most of these are planted during September and October in anticipation of the upcoming deer season. These cool-season plots serve to increase deer harvest and viewing opportunities for hunters. If prepared correctly, these food plots also supply deer with an excellent source of high quality food to help them through the stresses of winter and early spring. Many hunters do not realize they also can provide supplemental, high-quality food to deer during the spring and summer by planting warm-season food plots.

Before investing the time and money needed to plant spring and summer food plots, hunters, landowners, and managers need to decide if other, more important aspects of their deer management plan are being accomplished. Planting food plots during the summer, or even the winter, is of little value if the proper number of deer are not being harvested each season and deer numbers are not kept in balance with the habitat. Food plots also are of little value when other aspects of sound habitat management (prescribed burning, timber thinning, etc.) are not implemented to improve the quality of the available food and cover. Food plots should only be considered as one part of a well thought-out management plan and should not be considered the "magic bullet" for a mismanaged deer herd.

For those who feel their deer management plan can benefit from warm-season plantings, a few points concerning location, size, and preparation of these plots need to be addressed.

Location

Warm-season food plots need to be located in non-droughty sites with soils that will retain some soil moisture even during dry times of the year. For this reason, dry upland sites and areas with deep sandy soil should be avoided. Bottomland sites generally produce the best plots during the dry summer months.

If possible, warm-season crops should not be planted in the same plots where the cool-season food plots were planted. By alternating crop sites, the risk of soil erosion is reduced and the soil is allowed to build up during the time the field is fallow. This also prevents the loss of any supplemental food still avail-



Photo by James W. Hybart, III

able in cool-season food plots during the time between planting and when the warm-season crops are available to the deer.

Plot Size

Plots also need to be of adequate size to produce quality food throughout the late spring and summer. Warm-season plots generally need to be larger than cool-season plots because the crops commonly planted in the spring and summer cannot handle as much grazing pressure as the small grains and clovers commonly used in cool-season plots. Warm-season plots should be a minimum of three acres in size to expect any measure of success, with some crops requiring even larger plots in areas with moderate to high deer densities.

Preparation

As with all plantings, soil samples should be taken and soil tests should be made before planting time. The soil test indicates

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the recommended applications of fertilizer and lime for the crop to be planted. If lime is needed, it should be applied several weeks prior to planting so it can be incorporated into the soil and begin correcting the soil's pH. Fertilizer can be applied at the time of planting. Without the proper amounts of lime and fertilizer, a lot of effort will be wasted on planting food plots that will not produce as well as they should.

What to Plant

The biggest choice facing someone wanting to plant a food plot is what to plant. Probably the most preferred and some of the most nutritious foods that can be planted for deer are soybeans, lablab, and cowpeas. These plantings are high in protein and many other important nutrients essential for optimal growth of deer bodies and antlers. Deer will eat the leaves, vines, and pods of these crops. In areas with heavy deer populations, intense browsing during the early growth stages can virtually destroy an entire crop of soybeans or cowpeas. For this reason, it is important to plant large plots (greater than five acres) of these crops in areas with a significant number of deer if the goal is to provide supplemental food throughout the summer. Even then, the chances of having most of the plants grow to maturity are slim.

Other plantings popular among hunters and landowners wanting to give deer high quality food during the summer months are American jointvetch (*Aeschynomene sp.*) and alyce clover. Both of these plantings are high in protein and can withstand more browsing pressure than soybeans and cowpeas. Jointvetch can be expensive to plant and can often require a large amount of care to establish a good stand. Alyce clover, on the other hand, is adapted to growing in a wide range of conditions, is fairly drought tolerant, and usually does not require much pampering to establish a good plot. Once established, both jointvetch and alyce clover can produce an abundance of warm-season browse which will be readily eaten by deer.

One of the most popular warm-season plantings for deer is corn, as it is relished by deer and many other species of wildlife. One drawback with corn is that it does not have the high level of protein (16-17 percent) necessary for optimal body and antler growth. It also does not provide a supplemental food source during the summer months. The strong point for corn is that it is a high-energy food which enables deer to build heavy fat reserves for the hardships of late fall and winter. One option for corn plantings is to plant it with a high-protein crop, such as soybeans or lablab. This combination provides a quality food source in the summer months, as well as the late summer, fall, and winter.

Any combination of the aforementioned crops can be planted together to provide some variety in the food plot. By planting one of the crops that can sustain more grazing pressure, such as alyce clover, along with soybeans or cowpeas, there may be adequate forage throughout the summer months. It is also a good idea to stagger the plantings. By planting some plots or parts of larger plots about two to four weeks after the first planting, the growing season and the time the food is available is extended. This gets the most food production and deer utilization possible out of summer plots.

Another possibility for providing food during the summer months is the establishment of perennial plots of ladino (white) clover, red clover, and chicory. These plants can be combined with small grains (wheat and oats) during the fall to provide a huntable food plot in the first fall and winter following planting. Ladino clovers do best in fertile, moist, bottomland soils, while red clovers are more drought resistant than ladino clovers and are adapted to growing in a wide variety of soil types.

Both species of clover have their peak production during the warmer months of spring and summer. Ladino clover attains its highest levels of growth, protein, and other nutrients during late spring and early summer, although in years with adequate summer rainfall, production can last virtually year round. Ladino clovers can persist for several years after the initial planting with periodic fertilization, mowing, and herbicide applications. Red clover attains its peak growing period during mid to late summer, a time when deer food may be lacking. Red clover is a short-lived perennial and may not persist into its second summer. This may require replanting red clover after the first or second growing season.

Chicory does well in a variety of soils, including drought-prone sandy soils. It produces a very long tap root that allows it to persist through dry times of the year. Chicory often receives little use initially, but will start receiving more and more browsing as the summer goes on. Consumption will continue until the first heavy frosts. Once the weather warms, chicory will again grow, producing high-quality forage. Once established, chicory will persist for years with only minimal maintenance.

Although useful in many situations, planting food plots should not and can not take the place of proper harvest and habitat management. Planting food plots in areas where deer are at levels incompatible with natural food supplies only serves to prolong the problem and postpone the inevitable. Food plots should only be considered one part of a management plan involving proper harvest and habitat management. In populations where deer numbers are within the carrying capacity of the land, providing high quality, high protein foods during the entire year can help deer reach their full body and antler growth potential.

For more information on growing warm-season food plots for white-tailed deer, check out *Effective Food Plots for White-tailed Deer in Alabama* available online at <http://www.outdooralabama.com/hunting/game/deer.cfm> 



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