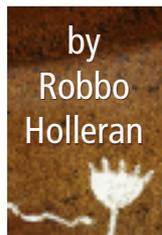


FOOD PLOTS

Not far from here, and just a few thousand years ago... The hunter-gatherer stalked through the brush, arrow quivered with a fresh Clovis point. The massive buck browsed among the beans and corn of the neighboring tribe. The swarthy man pulled back the taught string, peered over the shrubbery, and set the point on the target. The arrow flew true into the vital organs of the prey. The buck lurched, leaped to the side, and fell quivering as its legs kicked out the last embers of life. The hunter knelt over the fresh kill, giving thanks for the life-sustaining meat. He looked up and gazed upon the lovely neighbor princess, who said, "The garden gives more than just vegetables." And the idea of the food plot was born.

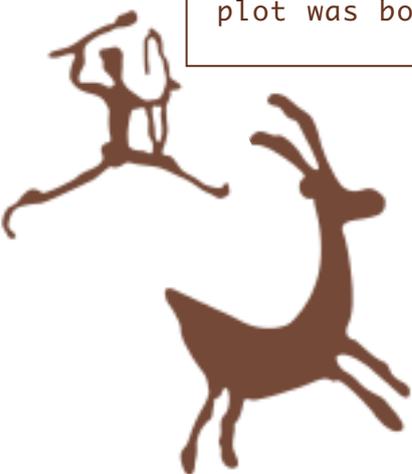
by
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In many states, feeding deer and other wildlife is illegal. But planting crops to which they have access is allowed and even encouraged. These food plots, small "gardens" of preferred plants, can bring in game from a distance, keep them on your property and even increase the carrying capacity of your location. Food plots work for deer, turkeys, ducks, and other game birds, but my experience is with plots for whitetail deer. The same principles apply to other target species.

Planning

For plots to be successful, they should be carefully planned and executed. They should fit into an overall land and forest management plan. And it is critical to learn, apply, and improve over time. Start by considering the overall habitat needs in an area of at least a mile around your property, since deer (especially bucks) travel widely. Your normal forest plan should be considering at least these elements: summer food and cover, and winter food and cover. Dense softwoods are preferred winter cover in many areas, and somewhere within a mile should be some excellent winter habitat, with nearby food such as young hardwoods or brushy thickets. In the fall, nut-bearing trees like oak or hickory provide a good source of fats and protein. During the growing season, mature forests provide little for deer, so a balance of age classes is an important forestry tool. Creating some young forest every 5 to 10 years with group cuts or other methods should be part of the long-term strategy in your for-



est plan. But it is important to look beyond your borders at what the neighbors are doing, since the deer don't notice your well-maintained property line.

Once you assess the neighborhood, consider what might be lacking. If there is a nearby orchard or 100-acre soybean field, your 2-acre food plot of these plants will be incidental. You will need to plant something that is scarce to attract deer. There are a myriad of choices, and each region will have its favorites. Annual plants that are seeded every year include soybeans and peas, some grasses and cereal crops, beets and brassicas like turnips. Perennial plantings last for several years, and include some brassicas, chicory, clover, and alfalfa. Shrubs and fruit trees, like various berries and apples, are another option. In most cases, a mix will be best. After all, you are adding to the diversity of your habitat with these plots, so why plant just one thing? A mix will provide foods over a longer period of time, with some crops more desired early or late in the season. As you try different things, you will find what works best in your area. I have one client with large patches of turnips and beets. The deer feed on the beets through the summer and early fall, and stay out of the turnips until the frost hits, during hunting season.

Choosing a location is critical. It is fairly simple to throw some seed on your log landings and main trails, and that can be a big help. But most plants will grow best where there is full sun, and good soil. Plots should be located close to bedding and other cover, and not near major agricultural areas, unless you can offer something the deer cannot resist. Advanced gamekeepers will have "feeding plots" and "hunting plots," like the beets and turnips mentioned above. Feeding plots will be larger, perhaps near other agriculture, and have the goal of attracting deer

through the growing season to keep them healthy and happy. Sizable plots of several acres will actually increase the carrying capacity of your land. Hunting plots will be smaller, and have the "candy crops" that they love during the desired hunting seasons. And this may vary from early archery to late rifle or muzzle-loader seasons. Hunting plots will be located close to thick cover, and near travel corridors.

Soil management is important. You are farming now. Testing the soil is the first thing: nutrients, pH, and organic matter are important, along with drainage and stoniness. Here in Vermont, we have some lovely rich loam, and a lot of rocks. There is a reason most of our land was abandoned by farmers 100 years ago. But since our soils are so variable, you can find a location with good soil somewhere. Adding lime or fertilizer (according to the soils report) and perhaps starting with cover crops to build up organic matter is usually needed to bring fallow soils into productive capacity. Log landings look like an ideal place to start, with a sunny patch in the woods, but these are usually right along the road, and have compacted soils with exposed subsoil and incorporated woody debris.

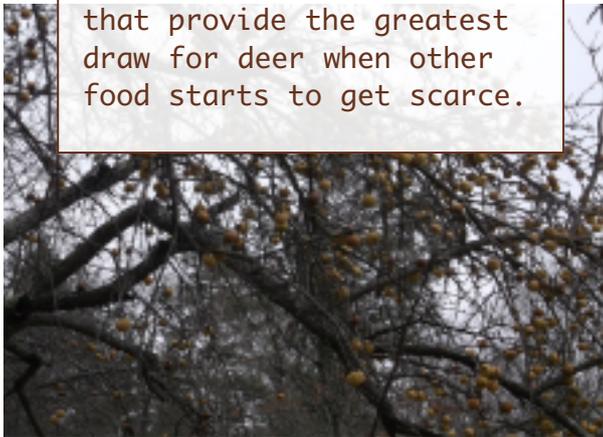
Once you select a site based on deer movements, other nearby habitat, decent soils, and perhaps access for maintenance and hunting opportunity, you should select your food crops. Having expert advice is very helpful. It can take years of trial and error (mostly error) to have the optimal success. Local experts can help create an overall plan, select a site, and choose an appropriate mix of crops. Most consulting

foresters have some experience, but there are expert gamekeepers who provide more valuable advice. Perennial crops can last for two to five years, reducing maintenance, but annual crops may be best for initial planting and soil preparation and can be more productive. Trees and shrubs sound like the least maintenance, but it is a great effort to control weeds and sprouts while they get established.

There are hundreds of choices of crops, and specially prepared seed mixes. Specialized mixes are advertised, and I do recommend a mix. If you know what you want to grow, you can make your own mix from commercial seed suppliers. Normal crops like clover, sugar beets, and soybeans will be available at local farm supply stores. Your choices for food crops will be refined by: your goals of feeding deer during the growing season, drawing them in for early or late season hunting, along with your soil and local deer preferences. It may take several years to get the magic combinations.

Apple Trees

I want to make particular mention of apple trees. Abandoned farmland sites often have old, wild apples, and every deer hunter knows that these can be a big draw for deer during hunting season—sometimes. Wild apples have an irregular crop with good and bad



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years. More importantly, they have a wide range of ripening dates. Early apples ripen while other food is abundant, and mostly fall to the ground and rot. It is the late varieties that provide the greatest draw for deer when other food starts to get scarce. Watch your apples to determine which trees are worth managing. The trees that hold fruit latest are most valuable. Cut all the other (non-apple) trees so they get plenty of sun, and test the soil to see if fertilizer or lime is needed. Apples like a little lime, and applying it is cheap and easy. I do not recommend pruning wild apples, though others do. The traditional orchard-style pruning is done to limit the fruit to maximize the premium quality, and keep it close to the ground for spraying and harvest. Tall, wild trees will produce more pounds of fruit, and keep it out of reach until it ripens and falls. Deer are not as fussy as we are. A grove of trees is best, though one good tree can be a hotspot, especially for archery hunting. And early apples can help keep deer in the habit of frequenting your location.

If you are planting apples, choose the late varieties like golden delicious, and full-sized instead of dwarf or semi-dwarf. Deer will chew these to the ground if they can, before they produce a single apple. So they need to be protected while small, and you want to grow tall trees that will be out of reach. Trees and shrubs may be a good choice if you want to avoid removing stumps, but you still need to be able to mow or spray to keep down the weeds.

An Agricultural Field

A portion of an agricultural field will be easiest to manage. This is likely decent soil, already cleared, stumped, sunny, and accessible. As mentioned before, the nearby agricultural crops may be overwhelmingly attractive, and it may not be the best place in terms of buck

confidence during the hunting season. But many great feeding plots and hunting plots are on remote agricultural land. If you clear an acre or two of forest, stumping and grading is a major necessary expense. It is possible to plant certain crops between stumps, but it will be a maintenance nightmare. Once your site is ready, there are options with tractors, smaller tillers, ATV-mounted cultivators, and herbicides for maintenance. You may have some of this equipment, and a major purchase might not be justified. There are also tractors and equipment for hire, especially to get started. Once your site is well prepared, an ATV or small tractor may be adequate. In prepared fields without serious weed problems, some crops can be planted by spraying herbicide and waiting until the weeds are dead. Then, seed can be spread and perhaps harrowed to stimulate germination, without any deep plowing. But poorer soils will be improved by growing a cover crop (like clover or alfalfa, which are suitable deer crops) and plowing before you go on to more demanding crops. Any use of herbicides needs to follow the label and state laws,

and may require a licensed applicator. But herbicides are an important choice to consider, and can be very effective at saving labor and controlling weeds. As mentioned, a soil test is critical to getting started, and expert advice will keep you moving in the right direction.

Game management is not just an occasional weekend thing, but is a way of life. Throwing some clover seed on your log landing, and hoping for the best is one approach. A well thought-out plan will have the best success. My suggestion is to learn about your land and the surrounding habitat, deer habits, and find the food sources that are lacking and unusually attractive. Talk to your neighbors with successful food plots. Plan for diversity in your normal forest management, and plan on locating your feeding and hunting plots in the best locations on good soils. Apply these plans with diligence and enlist expert help where needed. Make adjustments and improvements as you go. Taking an active role in the management of your wildlife makes the hunt so much more satisfying. ■

Robbo Holleran is a private consulting forester helping landowners meet their goals in Vermont and adjacent areas. His work has him outdoors about 150 days each year, plus play time. He is one of the authors of the new Silvicultural Guide for Northern Hardwoods in the Northeast.

