

FIVE AISLES AT CABELA'S

By Dr. James C. Kroll

As a long-term customer of Cabela's, I was justifiably excited to hear they were opening a new store at Buda, Texas. Even more exciting was the phone call from them asking me to give talks about deer management at their grand opening last summer. I was lucky enough to get to know Mr. and Mrs. Cabela on a deer hunt in Georgia a number of years ago, and have great respect for them.

My wife and I arrived early on Saturday morning to set up my projection equipment and to take a walk around the store. It was like walking right into one of their catalogs! Everything you ever wanted or thought about was there.

Since my talk involved food plots and supplemental feeding, I wanted to see what Cabela's had to offer. To my surprise, there were five aisles of products, ranging from seeds to minerals to attractants.

Even though I was a pioneer in food plot and mineral research—conducting a significant amount of research and development on them in the 1970s—I had no idea there were so many products to choose from.

Closer examination revealed products we long ago dismissed as gimmicks, unnecessary or not cost-effective, right next to plant varieties we had tested for years, with great results. "No wonder folks are so confused," I said to my wife.

Since that weekend, I have given a great deal of thought about those five aisles. And, it occurred to me, much about producing trophy whitetails is no different from those five aisles. This leaves folks with a confusing array of products and services, with little in the way of consumer education. I am not blaming Cabela's for having such a diversity; after all, they are in the business of providing you with many choices, and I applaud them for doing it.

Traveling around the country, I hear some of the strangest things from people—all said with great authority about deer management. Hunting is a $1.35 trillion industry today and, being such, attracts increasing numbers of charlatans. Everywhere you turn, there are at least "five aisles" of alternatives, whether it is nutritional products or management advice.

In this column, I would like to discuss some of the areas of concern I have for you, the consumer. I will limit my discussion to food plots. Future columns will deal with other important issues.

Food plots and supplemental feeding have become an integral part of deer management. Today, there are dozens of food plot varieties, offered either singly or in combination with other plants.

Farming for deer is an effective way to improve the nutrition of your herd. I must say, after nearly 30 years of research on the subject, we have found few new plant varieties that really work. In fact, we only have found two or three new plants that truly are useful to the manager.

Most of the "tried and true" varieties have been around for decades, while the few useful "new" varieties came from other countries where they also have been in service a number of years. Frankly, there are no "magic beans" for food plots! Here are the truths about food plots:

• There is not a single plant variety that will grow anywhere in the U.S.

• There is no easy way to grow crops for deer.

• You have to have at least 25 inches of annual rainfall to justify planting.

• It costs at least $100 per acre to produce a quality food plot.

• There is no workable way to plant without tilling of some type.

• A well-managed food plot will support 3-5 deer per acre. (A one-acre plot is equal to about 100 acres of natural production.)



DR. JAMES C. KROLL PHOTO

In addition, any plant that is touted as drought tolerant usually does not produce enough plant material to justify planting. That's how these plants evolved to be drought tolerant, by not having a great deal of plant above ground.

Successful cool season crops usually involve a mixture of cereal grains, legumes and more recently forbaceous plants such as chicory. (Chicory was brought to this country around 1700 as a cattle forage, and now is considered a noxious pest in some states.)

In drier areas, the cool season often is the only time you can grow a crop. Depending on where you are, cool season plots can produce up to five tons of plant material per acre. Frankly, we never have been able to prove any warm season crop is cost-effective.

The one exception may be plants such as lab-lab, but these require significant farming skills and equipment. Recently, some landowners have resorted to irrigation for their plots. Whether or not this is cost-effective is for the landowner to decide.

Do not fall victim to hype in selecting a food plot variety. Work with experienced managers and scientists in your area to select a planting. When you try something new, limit the area planted to small test plots distributed around your land. Some varieties will do well on one type of site or soil, yet perform poorly on others.

My colleague, Dr. Billy Higginbotham (Texas A&M University), and I came up with the "acid test" for selecting a food plot. Before you buy a new type of seed, the manufacturer must be able to answer the

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following questions:

- Does the cost of establishment justify planting?
- Will deer eat it?
- Is the plant available when the deer need it?
- Is the plant drought or cold tolerant?
- Can it stand up to heavy use by deer?

Any seed costing more than $3-5 per pound probably needs to be viewed with skepticism. Remember, as I pointed out before, a well-managed plot will cost at least $100 per acre to establish. A planting that produces only a small amount of crop should be suspect. Ask for published yield estimates. If the company cannot provide these, you may want to look for another plant. The Internet is full of information about expected forage yields.

For example, I looked up what could be expected from white clover, a popular planting in the south and northeast. There are many sites listing expected yields for white clover. Most studies on white clover report about 3,000 pounds per acre yield. If we then divide the expected yield into cost of establishment, growing white clover would cost $.03 per pound of forage.

Arrowleaf clover (a commonly planted clover in the south) can produce up to 7,000 pounds per acre, costing you only about a penny a pound—a substantial difference.

The second question should be obvious (whether or not deer eat it), but you would be surprised how many crops are planted annually that deer will not eat. I have a colleague who insisted on planting kobe lespedeza for his deer in East Texas. Since we seldom found a situation in which deer would eat this plant, I asked him why. "Well," he argued, "it grows so well!"

After years of trying, I finally convinced him to try something better. Just because a plant grows well in your area does not necessarily mean deer will eat it.

The brassicas (forage turnips, etc.) are another example. They have a high amount of alkaloid compounds, and are not consumed until they freeze. In the north, this may be useful to put off when the de eat them, but in the south, when does freeze?

The third question relates to when fora will be available. Not to pick on whi clover, but it does make a great exampl While the white clovers grow well in t north, intense summer heat and d conditions in the south cause this plant go dormant just about the time deer reall need it. Deer have two stress periods—lat winter and later summer—so, in order f a planting to be effective, it has to b available during one of these times.

Whether or not a plant is drought cold tolerant can be significant. That is on of the nice aspects of a plant such chicory, since it can go dormant durin periods of low rainfall, but comes bac after a rain. Other varieties may grow we in a wet summer, but die back in dry year Cereal grains such as forage oats, ry wheat and triticale are known to be col tolerant, making them excellent choices f

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cool season plantings.

Finally, if a plant cannot stand up to heavy grazing, it will not benefit your nutrition program. Plants such as Austrian winter peas are popular, since deer seem to love them, but I seldom see a planting last more than a few days. (Incidentally, I am amused by the number of folks who refer to them as "Australian" rather than Austrian winter peas.)

Cowpeas are also a highly preferred deer food, but unless you plant large acreages (two percent or more of your land area), it will never tolerate grazing. Lab-lab resists grazing better, but successful operations use exclusion fences to regulate the amount of grazing on these crops. That means a significant investment in time and money.

Again, however, it is the landowner who decides whether that is cost-effective. The only way to measure how your crop stands up to grazing is to use an exclusion cage. We use two-inch by four-inch welded wire, four feet tall and panel cut long enough to make a three feet diameter cage. Staking this cage to a T-post will assure deer or other animals will not damage the cage. Then, all you have to do is visually compare the height of the crop inside versus outside the cage.

There are few magic beans for deer forages. If there were, cattlemen would have discovered them years ago. I am not saying there will never be a successful new plant, only that the chances are remote.

Stick to the plants with years of research and performance behind them. Ask questions and demand answers before you buy anything related to deer management. Just because some celebrity endorses it, does not mean it will work!

There are excellent and cost-effective ways to supplement your deer's diet. You as a consumer must educate yourself about this important area of deer management. Hopefully, I have given you some ways to do this.