Plotting for the Harvest

Setting up the right food plots for this fall will help you control doe numbers and maybe even give you a crack at Mr. Big.

By James C. Kroll & Ben H. Koerth

"What do I plant for deer?"

After all these years, it remains one of the most frequently asked questions we receive at the Institute for White-tailed Deer Management and Research. Food plots have become an integral part of deer management, yet their role remains poorly understood. This is particularly true of plantings used to improve the chances of harvesting a good buck or increase the land's overall deer harvest.

Many times in these pages, we have written about ways to improve herd nutrition, and that remains one of the most critical roles of food plots. But this month, let's look specifically at how to use plots to improve your hunting results.

PLOT PURPOSES

There are two types of food plots: nutrition plots and harvest plots. As the name implies, nutrition plots are those intended to improve the diet of deer. They are aimed at a specific stress period.

In most regions, there are two stress periods. The first occurs during the winter, when cold weather normally prevents plant growth. The farther north you travel, the more limiting this season becomes. Not even the best food plot will grow under the snow. Also, the length of this stress period tends to be longer in the North because of the length of time winter conditions exist.

The second stress period is late summer/early fall, when most plants no longer provide the high level of nutrition they did when they were growing more actively. The summer stress period is longer in the South than in the North.

A total nutrition-plot program needs to address both stress periods. The problem is that in most cases this requires planting a plot twice during the year. No matter what you might have read, few plants provide year-round deer nutrition. So you end up plowing under or seeding through one crop to establish the next one -- just when you need the crop to be growing well and highly attractive.

What can you do to eliminate this problem? Let's see.

"DRAWING DOWN" YOUR DEER HERD

Interestingly, our Texas fisheries biologist colleague, Dr. Billy Higgin-botham, taught us something that applies directly to this problem. He pointed out that in order to efficiently harvest fish from a production pond or lake, you must draw the water down to a manageable pool size.

Now, you obviously cannot "draw down" the deer woods -- at least, not in easily reversible fashion. But you can effectively draw down the deer herd itself. How? That's where the second type of food plot -- the harvest plot -- comes into play.

A harvest plot, unlike a nutrition plot, is designed to be highly attractive during only a short period of time. It does not function primarily to improve deer nutrition. On the contrary, its primary purpose is to bring the animals to the hunter.

This lesson was learned the hard way by another colleague (who, for soon-to-be-obvious reasons, we will not identify). One year he planted every available bit of a 10,000-acre management area to cereal grains. The result was a lot of unhappy guests, as they failed to harvest big bucks that year. What the manager had done, quite unintentionally, was spread out the deer so they did not have to come to the food plots on which blinds had been positioned.

The next year, he planted every square inch again. However, this time he only planted his nutrition plots with varieties that were high in nutritional value during stress periods but not as attractive as the cereal grains during hunting season. The harvest plots adjacent to the hunting blinds were planted primarily with cereal grains, which the deer were actively seeking in autumn. By doing this, the manager essentially "drew down" the deer herd, concentrating their feeding activity where hunters were.



Low-till seeding can eliminate forage gaps. In this photo from Fort Perry Plantation, a clover and a cereal grain planted at different times grow side by side. Photo by Michael Skinner.

HOW TO DEVELOP GREAT HARVEST PLOTS

Obviously, the "perfect" harvest plot would be one containing a highly preferred crop growing actively when hunting season is open. Although no single plant variety will serve this purpose over the full range of the whitetail, we do have some suggestions for several that work well in different geographic areas. But before we get into what those plants are, let's look at some other factors that will affect your success.

The first question revolves around how much acreage you need in plots and where you should put them. In theory, you need only enough harvest plots to provide adequate setup locations for everyone who will be hunting there. In your overall management regime, we recommend planting a minimum of 2 percent of your area to food plots, so harvest plots would then encompass some portion of this amount, with the exact amount depending on the number of hunters and the frequency with which you hunt those areas.

Of course, you need to consider the effect of repetitive visits by humans. Our research long ago showed that deer quickly pattern hunters who frequent the same blinds or tree locations over and over. We prefer not to hunt the same plot more than once or twice a week. If your plots are hunted only on weekends, most of the time you won't have too much of a negative effect. If you hunt more frequently, however, you will need more plots.

Exactly where you set up is also critical. We have cautioned many times about not hunting right on top of a food plot, but that is where the average hunter wants to be. Except during the rut, mature bucks seldom venture onto a plot well before dark. They prefer to reach a staging area downwind of the plot at or just before dark and then enter the plot after legal shooting hours end.

Because of this, the best way to hunt a food plot is to position yourself along the travel corridor leading to the plot. Take an aerial photograph or map of your land and logically place the harvest plots so they coincide with landscape features that could serve as travel corridors to bedding areas, such as cedars, pines or other dense cover.

Harvest plots do not have to be large; even a quarter-acre plot can be quite attractive to a buck. In fact, the ideal situation is a small plot within thick cover, so bucks feel more comfortable visiting them in daylight.

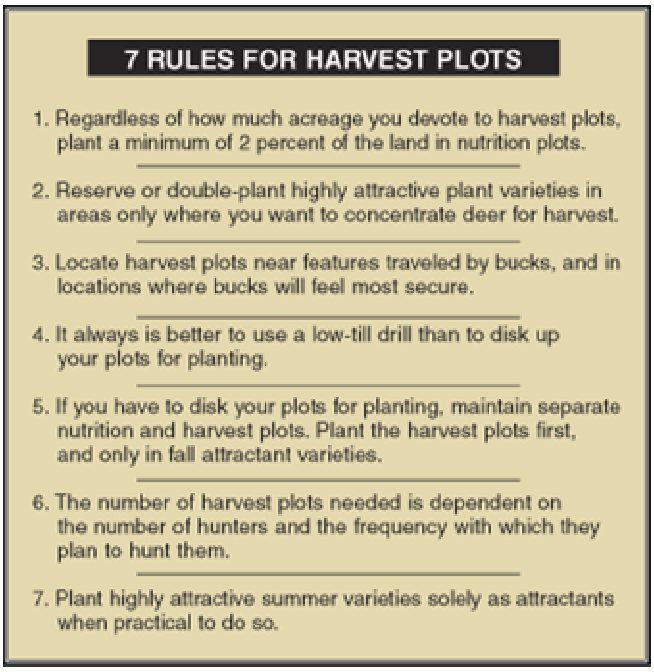
PICKING PLANTS FOR YOUR HARVEST PLOTS

What to plant is a broad subject. The answer depends very much on your geographic location; soils, moisture, shading and climate are notoriously variable from one place to another.

In naming plants we have found to be good for harvest plots, it is not our intent to favor one over another; sometimes several serve the same function equally well. So, please do not be offended if we neglect your "favorite" plant in the following regional breakdown.

A Southern Strategy

Much of the South normally fails to receive adequate moisture to support a crop planted early enough in the summer to provide abundant, attractive forage by the start of bow season. Thus, we generally rely on cool-season plantings to provide attraction for hunting -- provided they are planted to the right variety.



There are, however, some exceptions. Plant varieties capable of hanging on through the summer generally will put on a spurt of growth in early fall, and they are excellent for this purpose. Two commonly used plants in this category are alyceclover and chicory.

Alyceclover is a pseudo-clover most likely from the Indian subcontinent. For many years it has been used as a soil-building green "manure" plant, as well as livestock forage in Florida. We have conducted exhaustive research on this variety, and in much of the Southeast it works reasonably well. It tends to grow in hotter weather, but is not used that much by deer until the late-summer stress period. (Note: This is a tropical to sub-tropical plant and does not grow well in the North, so don't try it there.)

Many times we have talked a landowner into planting alyceclover, only to have him complain the deer do not eat it. Upon visiting the property, though, we are able to point out how deer tend to "patch graze" this crop. This is a phenomenon in which a deer repeatedly goes to the same spot to feed. This "mowing" keeps fresh growth coming from the heavily grazed plants. To the untrained eye, it appears deer are not eating the crop, but they are in effect actively seeking out only the best parts of the plants.

Interestingly, when there is good late-summer rainfall, deer might not graze alyceclover at all. Instead, they prefer native early-fall weeds. It is not a perfect world, and there are no perfect plants.

Chicory is perhaps the only broadleaf plant we have studied in the last decade that has lived up to the claims made about it. As a two-year plant (meaning it takes two years to mature), it can provide forage over the entire year in some areas. As with any other plant, growth is seriously retarded during periods of drought; however, we have found excellent drought hardiness in chicory.

In many Southern areas, white clovers such as ladino and regal go dormant through the hotter portions of the summer and then renew growth as the days shorten and temperatures moderate in the fall. This is especially true if there is adequate late-summer rainfall.

Whether a food plot contains alyceclover, chicory, white clover or some other good forage, it makes no sense to plow up a perfectly attractive crop in order to plant another one. Every year, however, we see deer managers do just that. They typically end up with bare dirt where an excellent crop had only days earlier been providing great nutrition to the deer.

In the South, we deal with this problem in one of two ways. First, we learned at Fort Perry Plantation, the magazine's research facility in Georgia, that using a low-till seed drill to plant a cereal grain such as forage oats through the summer crop allows us to have both nutrition and harvest plots in the same location. But not everyone has access to a low-till seed drill, and if that is the case, we recommend separate nutrition and harvest plots.

Three decades of forage research have continued to reinforce our belief that cereal grains are more attractive to deer than are legumes in early fall. So as not to favor one type of plant, however, any other cool-season variety proven to be highly attractive to deer could be treated in similar fashion.

A Northern Strategy

In the North, we long ago learned to reverse our Southern thinking. What grows well in the cool season in the South does well in the summer in most of the North. Whereas we plant warm-season crops in the Deep South, clover, alfalfa and cereal grains do quite well in the summer in the North.

Again, however, you can manipulate the composition of your plots to take advantage of the forage preferences and growth characteristics of various plants. Because most spring-planted cereal grains in the North will be maturing by August, it is a sound practice to plant harvest plots to these same varieties again in mid- to late summer. Protein content, digestibility and attractiveness decline dramatically in maturing cereal grains. Young, actively growing plants will draw deer to the plots you hunt.

Just as in the South, any other plant variety shown to be attractive at this time also can be planted in harvest plots only. You either can low-till the crop through the existing crop or reserve some of your plots for disking and planting. If you have large fields planted as nutrition plots, just plant the portions you want to draw deer to.

A More Intensive Twist

Whether your hunting territory is in the South or North, at some point in deer season there most likely will be a killing frost. To combat this, we recently have seen some deer managers plant a summer variety in mid-summer (North) or early fall (South), knowing the first heavy frost will kill the young plants. Managers have successfully used this strategy with green peas, forage peas and oats in the North, and cowpeas, soybeans and buckwheat in the South.

In many areas, opening day of bow season comes prior to the first heavy frost, giving bowhunters a decided advantage in hunting such plots. A mixture of one of these summer varieties with oats or wheat makes them even better.

CONCLUSION

Whitetail management is becoming more sophisticated. Whereas we once were satisfied just with getting a landowner to plant some type of food plot, we now target planting strategies for both nutritional supplementation and efficient deer harvest.

The latter is becoming more critical as deer herds grow rapidly in many areas. One of the biggest problems the whitetail faces is overpopulation. As hunter numbers decline and deer numbers rise, our favorite game animal is heading for some sad times if we do not control herd growth. Also, big bucks come from herds in balance with their food supply. A management strategy that includes the use of harvest plots thus can be the ticket to controlling deer numbers while growing trophies in the process.