

Cool season Food Plots for Deer

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Would you like to improve your chances of harvesting more deer and turkey during the hunting season? You might improve your hunting success by providing deer with high-quality winter food plots. In most cases, your turkeys will readily use these plots, too.

The ideal size of a winter food plot is from 1 to 3 acres. Try to plant at least one plot per 100 acres of forestland. A good rule of thumb is to devote from 1 to 5 percent of your deer range to wildlife plantings. Less acreage than this will make your range less attractive to deer, or it may cause early over-grazing. The cost of planting more than 5 percent of your acreage can be prohibitive.

In general, it is better to have a larger number of well distributed small plots than a small number of large ones. Also, smaller plots reduce the distance hunters are tempted to shoot, which can result in better shot placement and less wounding. An oblong or crescent-shaped plot produces more edge where the plot and the forest meet than a round or square plot does. The more edge produced, the better the plot.

Locate your winter plots in sites that are already fully or partially open. This will decrease the initial establishment cost and minimize the amount of timber revenue you or the landowner will lose by putting the land in wildlife food plantings. Possible locations for food plots are old logging decks, little-used woods roads, beetle kill areas, idle crop fields, fire breaks, or utility rights-of-way. When using natural gas rights-of-way, check with the appropriate gas company before breaking ground to be sure the gas pipe is buried deep enough.

If possible, find sites that are level or nearly level. Very dry ridge tops and very wet bottoms should be avoided if other places are available. Locate plots away from boundary lines, and try not to plant areas that are easily visible from public roads. If you have to plant near a road, you may want to plant a thick screen of Virginia pines or other evergreen trees or shrubs between the road and the plot.

Deer preferences vary from one location to another and with the season. Their preferences are influenced by the availability and variety of natural and planted foods they encounter during their daily movements. As the abundance and quality of foods change, the deer change their feeding habits. Deer select foods that provide certain nutrients that they need at certain times of the year. Therefore, a variety of plantings is better than a single crop.

Small grains and clovers are usually planted as cool-season foods for deer. These plants stay green in the winter, and they are attractive to deer. There are many small grain and clover varieties to choose from. Some produce early, while others provide maximum

forage production later in the growing season. Mixes are often planted to spread the production over a longer period of time.

Mix 1

2 bu. wheat

1 bu. oats

5 lb. crimson clover

7 lb. red clover

Mix 2

1 bu. wheat

1 bu. grain rye

1 bu. oats

5 lb. crimson clover

7 lb. red clover

Clover Mix 3

2 bu. grain rye

5 lb. ladino clover

Clover Mix 4

15 lb. red clover

10 lb. crimson clover

The amounts in these mixtures are for planting a 1-acre food plot.

Mixes 1 and 2 are adapted to a wide variety of soil types and conditions and will have to be replanted annually. Mix 3 will do best on soils that have good moisture-retaining capabilities but are not wet. Some examples are moist bottomlands and blackbelt soils. Once the lading clover in Mix 3 becomes established, it can persist for 5 years or longer. Mix 4 will produce on sites that become too dry for lading clovers. Clover Mix 4 probably will produce for 1 or 2 years and then have to be replanted.

No specific varieties have been noted. Use the variety adapted to your area. Your county Extension agent can give you information on which type to buy. Compare prices and ingredients that go into commercially prepared mixes (state law requires a listing on seed bags). A comparison will help you decide whether you want to buy a name-brand mix or make up your own.

In Alabama, late August to mid September is the best time to plant cool-season deer foods. Labor Day weekend is the traditional time for planting food plots on many hunting clubs in Alabama.

Break and harrow your plots several weeks before planting. This allows rains to settle the soil before planting time. The seedbed should be well prepared but firm. If lime and fertilizer are recommended by a soil test, they should be incorporated at this time.

It is very important to apply lime if needed. Lime corrects the pH of soil that is too acid. If the soil is too acid, much of the fertilizer will be tied up in the soil and will not be available to the plants you are trying to grow. Also, some crops, such as clover, are very sensitive to acid soils and will not grow if the pH problem is not corrected.

Small Grains. Broadcast small grain mixtures as evenly as possible over the seedbed. Lightly disk to cover seeds about 1 inch deep.

Clovers. Clover can take nitrogen from the air if the proper bacteria are present in the soil. Many soils do not have the bacteria, so it is a good idea to add the bacteria to the clover seed before it is planted. This is called "inoculating" the clover seed. Clover inoculum can be purchased where you buy your seed. Follow the directions on the inoculum bag.

Several manufacturers produce seeds that are pre-inoculated. Pre-inoculated seeds need only to be planted because the inoculum bacteria are in a coating applied to the seed. This makes planting easier and assures that each seed is properly inoculated. Pre-inoculated seeds do weigh more than "raw" seeds, and you must plant more of them than you do raw seeds. Pre-inoculated seeds usually cost more than raw seeds, as well.

Inoculated clover seeds should be broadcast over the seedbed after the small grains have been covered with the light dishing. If you are doing a small area, a hand-operated broadcast seeder works well. Clover seeds must not be covered very deeply (1/4 inch is best). A drag made from a piece of chain-link-fence wire will cover the seeds properly. If a roller or culti-packer is available, use it. A slightly packed seedbed can conserve moisture, help germination, and increase seedling survival.