



Food Plot Strategies for Bowhunters

STORY & PHOTOS BY

THE MSU DEER LAB

BRONSON STRICKLAND

STEVE DEMARAIS

MARCUS LASHLEY

You will never maximize forage production on this plot because of shade.

Planting food plots for deer and other wildlife is one of the most common management activities in Mississippi and for good reason – food plots provide much needed nutrition for deer and provide viewing opportunities for hunters. It's a win-win! Commonly, hunters and managers have the best intentions when planting food plots, but miss some opportunities to maximize their effectiveness for both optimal forage production, and for hunting options. So let's review some of the most common lost opportunities to take your food plots to the next level.

The first step in creating a productive food plot is site selection. The two most common mistakes I see are planting in wet, bottomland areas and planting in shady areas. Planting in a bottomland area can be very productive as long as the soil doesn't hold too much water. If you routinely see standing water in the area you want to plant, the site will likely generate much lower forage yield, or you may have an outright crop failure. Most wildlife forages require well-drained soil, so always consider the site. Secondly, many food plots are planted in very narrow alleyways

or roads where only an hour or two of direct sunlight is available to the plants. Many wildlife forages can grow in this environment, but forage production will be minimal. Planting along roads can be an excellent place for a food plot, and provide bow-shot opportunities, but be sure the road opening is wide enough to allow several hours of direct sunlight. Another tip is to orient long, narrow plots from east-to-west, rather than north-to-south, as this will expose the food plot to more hours of direct sunlight.

Once you have identified the site,

always take a soil sample for nutrient analysis. In Mississippi, a soil test thru the MSU Extension Service costs only \$8.00 – this will be the best money you can spend on your food plot! A soil analysis report will provide the pH of the soil as well as the availability of phosphorous, potassium and other micronutrients that are critical for optimal plant growth. Typically my first question for someone with a food plot production problem is ‘have you submitted soil samples for analysis?’, and most of the time, the answer is no. Once you have the results from your soil test, adjust the pH by adding the recommended amount of lime. In some cases you may have to do this for multiple years to neutralize the soil and bring the pH up to 6.0 or greater. Next, get the recommended mixture of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium fertilizers from the farm supply store. Simply applying a few bags of triple 13 fertilizer on a plot is not advisable, and can even be counterproductive in many instances!

Adjusting the pH and adding right type of fertilizer based on the crop you want to grow is critical for a successful food plot. And if that is not enough, consider the effect proper fertilization has on deer attraction. A recent study conducted by the MSU Deer Lab showed that deer were 11 times more likely to feed in a fertilized plot, than in an adjacent, unfertilized plot – 11 times more likely! It stands to reason that healthy, actively growing plants are more nutrient dense and therefore more attractive to deer.

After you have taken care of the soil, and are ready to plant, make sure you follow the recommended seed rate and planting technique. Many people think that adding double the amount of seed is good, but many times you can actually decrease forage yield by crowding too many plants on the plot. Just think how a cotton or soybean farmer sows the exact amount of seed so each plant gets the right amount of nutrients to optimize growth. Too few plants will make

for a sparse food plot, but too many plants can be problematic too. Also remember to follow the planting instructions for seed depth. Many seeds must have the correct planting depth for germination. This error often occurs when planting clover. Most clovers should not be planted any deeper than ¼ inch, so disking in clover seed along with wheat or oats will severely reduce the clover germination rate.

Remember these 3 letters – PLS – this stands for Pure Live Seed. All seeding rates are given as PLS, which means you have to look on the bag to find how much of the weight of the bag is actually viable seed. Trust me, this makes a big difference. It’s almost a certainty the next bag of clover you purchase will have a PLS of around 50%. This means you think you just paid an arm and a leg for 50 pounds of clover, but in reality, you only bought 25 pounds of clover. The total weight of the bag also includes the weight of the seed coating, which can be half the weight of the bag. So you will have to adjust your calculations accordingly. If the recommended rate is 5 pounds of clover, you will have to plant 10 pounds by weight to get 5 pounds of PLS.

One last thing on the topic of seeding rate – deer density. Remember seeding rates are determined based on the optimal amount of space each plant needs to grow to its potential and collectively make a productive stand. But what if you have so many deer browsing the plot such that plants will never grow more than 3 inches high? Well, you have 2 options. You can harvest more deer, or create more food plots. If neither of these are options you may



A properly lime and fertilize plot not only improves forage yield, it also attracts more deer – 11 times more deer!



To have a beautiful stand of clover in March and April, you must use herbicides to control the grasses that will compete with the clover.

consider increasing the seeding rate to provide more plants per acre and see if it makes a difference.

The final tip for productive food plots is the use of enclosure cages. If your food plot is doing what it was designed to do, you may misidentify deer browsing for crop failure. Often times when planting small plots, or in areas with high deer densities, the deer will literally eat all of the forage that is produced, which leads many people to believe they experienced a crop failure. By installing one or two enclosure cages on your food plots you will be able to determine exactly how much forage your food plot is producing and how much has been consumed by deer. Further, you can actually measure which food plot forages perform best on your property. At the MSU Deer Lab we always say “you can’t manage what you don’t measure.” So for the same reason you measure antlers, body weights, and lactation rates, you

need to measure the effectiveness of your food plot management system. Remember, just as a farmer does not produce a bumper crop of corn or soybeans by accident, you cannot expect highly productive food plots by accident either. The more preparation you devote to your food plot program the more your deer and other wildlife will benefit.

The last topic I want to cover is size and shape of food plots. I recommend thinking about the purpose of each plot in 2 ways – do I want to design this plot to maximize plant growth and nutrition, or is this a bowhunting plot. To maximize plant growth, you need to consider the factors mentioned above (well-drained soil and sunlight) as well as size and shape. Just imagine if you had 3 acres planted in any shape you desire. You could make the plot a square, or a long, skinny rectangle. Which plot do you think would yield more forage? That’s right, the

square. This is because you will have less “edge effect” from competing vegetation (competition for water, soil nutrients, and sunlight). Some deer managers even take this to the next level by not even hunting “feeding plots” so deer never fear accessing all this nutrition.

Hunting plots will typically never yield the same amount of forage than a feeding plot will, but that’s okay – your goal with this plot is to position yourself close enough to deer for shot opportunities. So in this case, a long, skinny plot is okay. You may also want to use some bends and turns in the plot such that a deer can’t stand on one end and see the entire plot. Bucks are curious critters and will often walk around that turn or pinch point in the plot to see who else is there. This provides a good opportunity for bowhunters – position yourself close to that pinch point and take advantage of their curiosity.

The last advice I’ll give is never neglect your stand position relative to the wind. Make sure you have 2 or 3 locations on the plot you can hunt depending on the wind. Research from the MSU Deer Lab revealed it only takes about 3 days of hunter activity on a property to change deer behavior – the more hunter activity goes up, the less deer will expose themselves. So do your best to minimize deer detecting your presence!

I hope this information helps you improve food plot performance and hunting opportunities this fall and in the future. I, too, will be perched in a tree this fall and winter with a bow in my hand taking advantage of these food plot strategies. Happy hunting!