



Whitetail Deer Food Plot Considerations

Food plots are a way the sportsman or nature enthusiast can provide nutrients for deer. Currently, Illinois game law prohibits any other means of feeding whitetail deer. To clarify, salt blocks, mineral blocks, feeding stations, lick pops, and all other like sources are illegal within the state all year long. The change in this law came after the discovery of chronic wasting disease, a disease which is spread by saliva of infected deer. Because of the potential to spread this disease all attractants except food plots were banned.

If one enjoys watching deer, photography, or hunting them, a food plot is a great choice. First, decide what you want. Are you looking to provide a food source only for observation at a certain time of year? Are you looking to hunt animals during bow or gun season? The list is endless, but the decisions are yours.

Once the decision is made as to why plant a food plot, then where to plant becomes important. If you are looking to observe deer, then open space might be the best choice. If you are looking to hunt deer, then a more secluded area might be the location you need.

Knowing that fertility influences both quality and quantity of available forages, one needs to soil test before planting. This is done by digging a V-shaped hole 7-inches deep and taking a 1-inch slice of soil from one side. Place this in a bucket and do it three to five times for each area. Mix these samples together and place two cups of soil in a paper bag. Now, make a call to find out how to send your sample to a lab. Be sure to tell them you are planting a food plot of legumes. A list of soil test facilities in Illinois can be found at this website: <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/soiltest/>.



Once you receive the soil test back, you can apply fertilizers accordingly. The pH should be from 6.2 to 6.5, the p¹ should be near 35 and the K should be above 250. Limestone will raise pH. Phosphorus such as 0-46-0 will raise the p¹ and potassium called potash 0-0-60 will raise the K level. After adjusting fertility level of the food plot area you are ready to plant.

The following table is a guide to adjust fertility levels to grow legumes:

pH Test	Apply tons of agricultural limestone	P ¹ Test	Apply lbs. of 0-46-0	K Test	Apply lbs. of 0-0-60
5.0—5.3	5	20—24	300	200—209	350
5.4—5.7	4.5	25—30	205	210—220	250
5.8—6.1	3	30—34	100	221—249	200
6.2— or above	0	35 or above	0	250 or above	0



Alfalfa

There are more deer forage attractant mixtures on the market than this publication could list. The following forages are available locally at farm supply outlets. Many of these should be very reasonably priced. When purchasing your seed, purchase certified seed. There have been many studies which show certified seed will out yield common varieties. This means there will be more forage for the deer to eat.

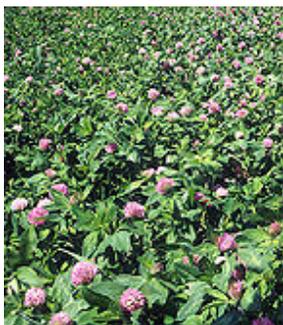
Alfalfa can be seeded in the spring or fall. April 20 is the target for spring or by August 21 in the fall. Alfalfa should be seeded at 12-15 pounds per acre. The problem with alfalfa is that insects such as alfalfa weevil will destroy your plot. If you are not prepared to spray alfalfa with an insecticide, then this forage should not be planted.



Ladino Clover

If deer have a choice of alfalfa, soybeans, or corn you will find them 90% of the time in the alfalfa field. This is a deer magnet, but it requires intense management. Alfalfa is a perennial and should last four to five years with good management.

Ladino clover is a great choice for deer plots. This forage will last four to five years and usually requires no special attention. This forage may be frost seeded by March 15 or planted in the fall by August 20. Ladino clover frost seeded over some wheat will establish readily. Two to four pounds per acre is a suggested rate.



Red Clover

Red clover is another legume that is relatively easy to establish. Frost seeding by March 15 over a wheat area or some grass will establish red clover. Broadcast at a rate of eight to ten pounds per acre. Red clover can also be planted in the fall by August 20. Red clover planted from common seed will only last two years. But, certified seed trials have survived up to four years.



Frost seeding is broadcasting seed onto the soil while temperatures fluctuate from freezing to thawing. This action moves the seed into the soil. For success heavy vegetation should not be present on the area to be seeded.



The three fore mentioned legumes are readily available locally and should establish easily if a good seed bed is prepared.

Grasses such as orchard grass or Timothy are good choices if grass is needed on highly erodible land. These can be companion forages with the above legumes planted at four to six pounds per acre. But, they are not the attractant or the food choice for whitetails. Legumes are far more successful for deer plots planted by themselves if possible.

Soybeans are another legume that deer truly enjoy. Soybeans are annuals. This means they will have to be planted every year. With this in mind a sequence of plantings should be planned.

A suggested planting schedule sequence follows depending on the time of year the plot will be planted.

Fall planting schedule:

Wheat or oats
Broadcast legumes over this area in the spring
Another area should be prepared for soybeans in late spring

Spring planting schedule:

Soybeans or legumes
Fall seed wheat or oats for forage

Allowing these areas to not be disturbed will provide cover and food for small animals such as quail, rabbits, and songbirds.

Soybeans can be planted from April 15 to September 15. Weed control is much easier to obtain with glyphosate tolerant soybean varieties. Forty-five to sixty pounds per acre should be planted. Spraying over the top of glyphosate tolerant soybeans will destroy the weeds in your newly planted soybeans, but will not harm glyphosate tolerant soybeans.

Soybeans are an excellent attractant if agricultural crops are limited in your area. Late summer planted soybeans are an excellent late summer, early fall forage for deer.

Winter oats are planted before September 15 and spring oats for forage before September 1 at a rate of 100 pounds per acre.



Deer are browsers. They will feed on buds, twigs, leaves, acorns, and many forages. Deer love oak acorns so planting near large acorn producers will be a travel path for deer.

Wheat is planted in the fall after September 15 at a rate of 90—120 pounds per acre. These provide forage during the winter months and a great cover for your clovers in the spring. Wheat or oats should be fertilized with additional nitrogen for best growth. Apply 75-pounds of urea or ammonium nitrate per acre broadcast over the top in February or March.

Plots are much easier to establish if the ground is worked, but equipment is not always available. A product like glyphosate can be used as a burn down herbicide. This means you kill existing vegetation. Now you can broadcast seed over the top of this area or drill your forage into the ground with a slit seeder. If chemicals are not possible, then mowing the area closely will help seed to grow.

How big should the plot be? One-fourth to one-half acre plots are much easier to start. Larger one acre plots may be needed if deer pressure is high. So, start small and work your way up. Start some plots along woodland edges, some inside woodland openings and another 200 yards from heavy cover. The later will bring out big bucks during rut that you will not see the rest of the year. How many are enough? If agriculture is limited in your area, then one acre per 20-acres of woodland is suggested or one per 40 acres if agriculture crops are in the area.

No, this publication did not talk about brassicas, corn, or others. Although there are many choices available for food plots, the ones mentioned will provide an excellent food source and are available locally at your farm supplier. The reward of a food plot is knowing you are helping support the survival of wildlife. It will improve your hunt or your observation of the elusive whitetail.



Experience has taught that if deer are not pressured they will expose themselves more. So, once the plot is planted, leave it alone. Return only to provide maintenance to the plot area.

Suggested Planting Rates for a Whitetail Food Plot

Winter Food Plots:

Wheat	120 pounds per acre	September 15—October 30
Winter Oats	100 pounds per acre	August 10—September 15

Annual Browse:

Soybeans	45 to 60 pounds per acre	April 20—July 10 or For forage: August 15—September 20
Spring Oats, seeded in fall	100 pounds per acre	August 1—September 1 for forage

Perennial Browse:

Alfalfa	12—15 pounds per acre	February 15—May 1 August 1—September 15
Ladino Clover	2—4 pounds per acre	January 15—May 1 August 1—September 15
Red Clover	8—10 pounds per acre	January 15—May 1 August 1—September 15

When planting the above forages on the later dates, one can expect less forage to be produced that growing season and the possibility of a planting failure.

These can be broadcast over an existing cool-season grass stand or seeded into a prepared seedbed.

Rates vary depending on planting method (drill or broadcast). Use the higher rate for broadcasting.

Food plots are only part of the answer for a wildlife management plan. Habitat must also be available for cover and protection from predators. Water is necessary for survival. A food plot near a creek or pond will definitely be a draw.

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