

# Food Plot Basics

Food plots are an important tool of wildlife management. They are used primarily for two reasons: 1) to supplement the diets of wildlife during times of stress, when native forage is lacking, or to enhance the health and condition of wildlife. 2) To attract and concentrate wildlife for hunting or viewing.

Food plots can be designed to fit almost any situation, whether you are a lease hunter looking to attract and hold deer close to your hunting blind, or you are a landowner managing for turkey and trophy deer. However, food plots are not a cure for poor management practices. That is why you must consider food plots not as a solution to any one problem, but as a tool for reaching a larger management objective. Let's look at the steps to planning and planting a productive food plot.

**Planning:** Why are you planting food plots? Decide on what your end result should be and then select the seeds that fit. Be sure that your goals for the food plot are in tune with your overall management picture. For example, if your objective is to grow bigger, healthier bucks, then you first need to make sure that your other habitat and deer management steps are in place (i.e. make sure your deer population is appropriate, the range is in good condition). Then decide how the food plot fits in. Maybe you need food plots that will attract deer during the hunting season in order to sort out and cull inferior deer. Or, maybe you need a food plot with high protein plants that will help the bucks with antler growth in the late inter/early spring.

**Selection site:** Consider your target species and reasons for planting the plot. For example, if planting for deer or quail, look for locations near cover. Deer and quail prefer to feed in areas that offer cover close by where they can escape quickly. Field border edges and brush lines are excellent places to plant strips of food plots. Then, narrow down the choices to locations that are conducive to good growing conditions, such as fields that have already been cultivated and areas with suitable soils and moisture retention. Also consider your objective for the food plot. If you are planting for hunting season attraction for deer, look for locations near game trails and away from roadways and property lines. If planting food plots that quail may eventually use for nesting areas, choose sites away from cattle and other well-traveled areas. Finally, decide on the plot size. Food plots can comprise from 2-5% of the total land acreage and can be of any size. However, keep in mind that very small plots or plots in areas with high deer densities can be wiped out overnight. Cattle and other livestock need to be excluded.

Once you've selected the site, get a soil test. This will tell you if the site has potential or would be too cost prohibitive to plant. It will also tell you if you need lime and what kind and amount of fertilizer you may need.

**Seed Selection:** Do your homework and choose plants that will help accomplish your purpose, whether it's attraction or nutrition. Then decide on whether your management calls for permanent plots or annual plots. In other words, do you need plants that are strong re-seeders or perennials and will continue to come back every year, or plants that are weak re-seeders that will need to be replanted every year? The obvious advantage to permanent plots is that they will sustain themselves year after year with only moderate maintenance. The advantage of annual plots is that warm-season and cool-season plots can be planted on the same piece of ground.

Choose what mixes you buy very carefully. Look closely at the components. Is it

composed of similarly sized seed that will stay suspended in the blend and uniformly flow through the planter? Do all the seeds have similar planting depths? Will the different plants compete each other? Are they adapted to your area?

**Site Preparation:** There is no substitute for a good seedbed. Ideally, the soil seedbed should be well-cultivated, weed-free, firm, moist and fertile. On previously uncultivated ground, much of this can be accomplished by an initial deep plowing, followed by several discings to further break up the clods and destroy remaining vegetation. On recently cultivated ground that is relatively clean and loose, discing two inches deep or so about a month before planting and then again right before planting is sufficient. A soil test should be taken prior to planting to determine whether or not lime or fertilizer needs to be applied.

**Planting:** There are two common methods of planting.

Drilling - Using a seed drill allows for precise depth placement of the seed and generally required a lower seeding rate. Drilling seed will usually result in a better stand of plants from less seed planted.

Broadcast and Drag - This involves using a broadcast spreader to distribute seed over the ground, then lightly discing or dragging (with a piece of pipe, gate, timber, etc.) to bury the seed to the appropriate depth. This method is the most common because of the simplicity and availability of equipment. Since the seed is not placed at a uniform depth, a heavier seeding rate may be needed to compensate. It is critical that attention be paid to the planting depth of the seed. Burying seed too deep or too shallow is the most common cause for getting a poor stand of plants.

In either case, packing the soil before and after planting is recommended. A cultipacker or roller is ideal for firming up the seed bed. A firm seed bed will reduce air pockets in the soil and keep moisture closer to the seed/seedling.

Planting on a well-prepared seed bed that has been treated according to its soil test will often be the difference between getting a fair/poor stand of plants or having a healthy, successful food plot.