

It All Starts When it Ends

By Jason Snavely

It will be late July by the time this issue of *Quality Whitetails* reaches you, and fall planting will be on your mind. By now, many dedicated food plotters have been watching their spring plantings of warm-season crops grow into tons of high-quality forage. After working with food plotters for many years, I'm aware that some feel like their job is mostly over by now, except for that one cool-season hunting plot they plant in brassicas or cereal grains so they can see and harvest deer during hunting season. Somewhere within your hectic daily schedule of making the family breakfast, feeding the dog, emptying the garbage, taking the kids to school, and going to work, do yourself a favor and sit down for 30 minutes to lay out exactly what makes your food plot program more attractive than your neighbor's – 365 days of the year. A high-quality food plot program does not start or end. It's a year-round effort, and with some planning you can ensure your short-term objectives are met (hunting-season attraction) at the same time you achieve long-term nutritional and attraction goals.

It All Starts When It Ends

Winter can put a serious strain on white-tailed deer. Natural forages are at a low ebb, and extreme weather adds physical stress. Bucks often enter this season with a physical deficit, having spent tremendous amounts of energy and body mass during the breeding season. If they carry this deficit over to spring, they must play catch-up before they can begin making a "profit" from spring foods, which fuel body and antler growth through summer. It's your job as a food plot and habitat manager to ensure they aren't left struggling through winter with a physical deficit. This applies to does as well – you want them to enter spring in as good shape as possible. Their physical condition affects the health and survival – and lifelong physical performance – of their fawns.

For me, **the real importance of food plots starts when hunting season ends.** Hunters who plant food plots only to achieve hunting-season goals are often leaving a nutrition gap in winter. The more successful you are at closing nutrition gaps, the closer your deer management program will get to its maximum potential.

We all have our favorite cool-season plots. There are those plots that consistently allow us to achieve our doe-harvest quota or the one that helped you pattern and harvest your largest buck to date. Cool-season attraction crops like cereal grains (wheat, oats, rye, triticale), winter peas and brassicas are highly successful in helping us achieve our harvest goals (That's the plan for the Bowman West plot described in the sidebar). However, I'd like you to add a new twist this year when planting for fall. If you have plenty of acreage devoted to food plots, label a few as "winter nutrition plots" to allow deer that don't go home in the truck this season to feed stress-free and build the necessary reserves for the

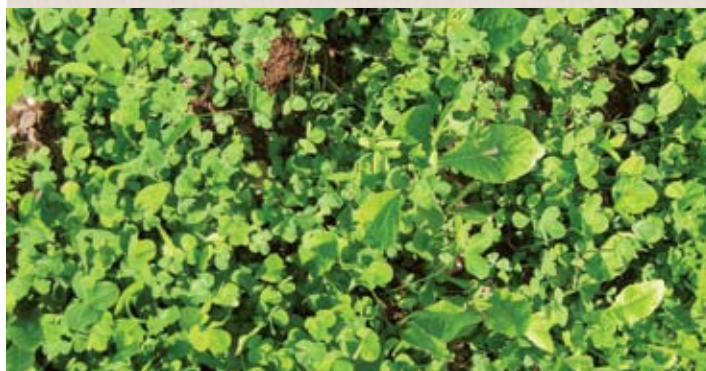
BOWMAN PLOT UPDATE

As I reported in the last issue, good progress has been made getting the two Pennsylvania food plots known as Bowman East and Bowman West into shape. Bowman Plot East went from being snow covered and scattered with 15-foot-tall invasive autumn olive and multiflora rose brush in late February, to a productive first-year forage soybean plot by the beginning of June. The photo below was taken on June 15, the same day the Roundup Ready® soybeans were sprayed to knock back weed competition. A browse enclosure has been placed in the plot, along with a trail-camera, to monitor use. In late June we were starting to monitor summer travel patterns that will help determine stand locations in early fall.



Meanwhile, Bowman Plot West will be planted in cool-season annuals in August as an attraction/hunting plot for fall. With its close proximity to the larger forage soybean plot (Bowman East) we expect to intercept deer that stop to forage on the blend of brassicas, cereal grains and winter peas.

Bowman West was going to sit empty all summer. But we had an older bag of a perennial blend left over from a previous season. Rather than toss it out, we planted it in the fallow plot in April. We've simply been mowing the weeds off the top of the first-year plot while the clover, alfalfa and chicory blend provided some late spring/early summer forage (see the photo below). In August, once the forage soybeans in Bowman East are more productive, we will turn this plot over and plant our fall attraction and winter forage blend of cereal grains, brassicas and winter peas.



rigors of the long, cold winter. These can include standing corn and brassicas. Get creative with these food plots and incorporate multiple cultivars with the same strategy: feeding next year's deer.

If you're not blessed with numerous food plot locations, plant offerings that span multiple seasons. Forage soybeans provide leafy forage in summer and early fall and high-energy grain in winter if you leave the crop standing (this is the goal of the Bowman East food plot described in the sidebar). Turnips provide leafy forage in fall and winter and, when the tops have been browsed away, deer will eat the softball-sized roots.

By the way, if you're having trouble carrying grain from your soybeans and standing corn right up to spring green up, you need to examine your herd density in relation to your habitat and food plot acreage (see "Whitetail Wisdom" on page 10 of this issue for a discussion of density evaluation).

Keeping Deer Loyal

I'm very loyal to my favorite local lunchtime hangout because the owners keep the buffet well stocked with my favorite foods. I found this place four years ago when my former favorite restaurant let their service level and food quality slide, forcing me to go looking for a new lunch option. I've been spoiled by my new favorite location, and as long as quality remains high, other restaurants are going to have a hard time luring me away.

What about the deer whose home range overlaps, or is contained by, your hunting land? If they wander onto your neighbor's land, will they find food plots and natural vegetation that better suit their needs at any time of the year?

You get the picture. Your program must consistently provide deer with adequate amounts of nutrition at the right time. Deer managers who provide year-round nutrition through diverse food plot crops and well-managed habitat ultimately end up with "loyal" deer. Providing maximum amounts of high-quality food for your deer through food plots and habitat management is a 365-day proposition, so plan accordingly.

The good news is, we can usually predict the weak spots in our neighbors' buffet. Few hunters consider planting perennials such as clover and alfalfa to benefit *spring* nutrition, not just to increase their chances of tagging a buck. In my experience, most food plotters still consider their food plots to be either "summer feeding plots" or "hunting plots," with the most common being the "hunting plot" planted sometime mid- to late-summer. They fail to plan for that key rebuilding phase of late winter/early spring when corn and soybean fields are empty.

This fall, supplement your favorite cool-season cereal grain plots as well as your standing corn and soybean fields with perennials that become productive in early spring. Species that serve this purpose include alfalfa, white and red clovers and chicory. These perennials invest all of their initial energy into establishing a good root system. By planting them in fall you've provided that head start for a quality flush of deer food when spring arrives!



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