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PLANT IT RIGHT AND THEY WILL COME!

THIS CHAPTER IS A PRELUDE to the information that will appear in my next book, “Plant It *Right* and They *Will* Come!” It will be a detailed book on all aspects of growing quality food plots, woodlot management and deer management. With Quality Deer Management (QDM) and food plots being such hot topics today, I felt it was important for me to at least include one chapter in this book that addresses QDM and food plots. So, if quality deer management is among your strategies, then you’re probably going to enjoy this chapter. It will help you make good decisions when it comes to planting food plots and the overall enhancement of the natural vegetation on your hunting lands.

It doesn’t matter if you own, lease, or hunt public land. There are ways to improve the food sources for deer, turkey, bear, waterfowl, and other wildlife that doesn’t require a lot of brains or brawn. Trust me, a little knowledge coupled with a lot of time and willingness to work at planting and enhancing natural vegetation can improve your deer hunting ten-fold. The following chapter is just an overview of the many elements that must not only be considered but employed to grow food plots successfully.



Planting food plots on large plots like this, or small half- to one-acre tracts of land to attract and hold deer is catching on all across the country. (credit: Windigo Images)

DECISIONS, DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Once you make the decision to develop a QDM program on your land, you should understand what QDM actually entails. It is an agenda that takes in four crucial elements: habitat management, hunter control, herd administration, and herd monitoring. All four components help you improve the overall health, nutrition, and quality of your land and deer herd. Once you undertake a QDM program you become a game and land steward.

Contrary to what most QDM would-be hunters believe, you do not need a huge piece of land to begin practicing QDM. While it



Five does feeding in a corn field left standing for deer to eat during the winter. I leave several acres of corn standing on our farm to help feed deer and other wildlife through the winter months. (credit: Ted Rose)

helps to have a big piece of property of 500 acres or more to practice QDM, it can be done with 100 acres or less. The only difference between the two is that on the larger piece you can almost assure yourself that a greater portion of the deer on your land will remain there even during the hunting season. On smaller pieces, the deer you have fed and groomed to have better body weights and antlers will also be using the neighbor's property. That is why if you have a piece of land between 50 and 100 acres you should try to

enlist the cooperation of your bordering neighbors to undertake a QDM program as well.

Whatever size property you have, all you need to do is set aside one percent on small pieces to five percent on very large tracts of land. On the combined acreage that my cousin Leo and I own (actually our wives own them), we have dedicated about two to ten percent of the land to plantings and other habitat improvement. For the guy who owns 50 acres or less, planning to set aside two to three acres is certainly practical.

It is important to remember before you make a decision about undertaking a QDM program that not all lands will benefit from

such an agenda. QDM is not a magic pill that will fix all ills concerning your deer herd. If your property is located in areas with very high deer densities, growing food plots may only bring on more problems by increasing the overall deer numbers even further! As any qualified biologist or land manager consultant will tell you, the land can only support so many deer and anyone considering a QDM program must keep this in mind before moving forward. If this is the case, then you must undertake a very serious deer reduction plan including taking as many does as is practical to get the numbers down for at least two to three years before planning a QDM program. Most of us, however, don't have that problem. In fact, we have the exact opposite complication.

Your next consideration is to decide on exactly what level of management you should undertake. I recommend to all my clients (those who hire me to consult with them about QDM) to walk before you run. Basically, you must decide if an involved management program is practical for you. If you start small by just planting a few green plots in the woods, along trails, or perhaps in a small open field, you will get your hands in the dirt and soon find out if playing in the dirt is for you.

Once most people get the feel of planting they enjoy it. It doesn't take long before someone who was planting to just attract deer during the hunting season, turns into a full-fledged deer manager. Now, his planting plans are focused on understanding nutrition, population control, water management, ecology, and deer behavior. He has made a complete metamorphosis from hunter to land steward.

TIME TO PLANT

Okay, now you have made the decision to plant. No matter how big or small your land is, or whether you are clearing small patches of property in the woods or planting in fields, the very first step is to remember the adage "tools make the job easier." When it comes to playing in the dirt, nothing could be more profound! Knowing where to plant is a detail that requires a lot of planning. There is not enough space in this book to discuss it thoroughly here. Just remember that knowing where to plant is as important as any thing you have to consider when planting crops.

For now, let's just say that there are a few options. If you



Using a small 30 HP tractor like this and reliable attachments like a Land Pride Disc Harrow helps make preparing soil in plots of one acre or more quicker and easier.

already have crop fields—that's a plus. If not, you can turn over old fields that have not been used in a while. You can also brush hog overgrown fields and turn them under to create plots. It is also possible to create plots in the middle of woodlots but this takes a lot of work, time, and money on your part. I have

found it is better to hire out this type of work.

HIRE A DOZER TO CLEAR WOODLOTS

Many hunters have property that is entirely wooded and they want to create food plots. Heed this suggestion carefully. If you have to remove trees and brush to plant a plot in the woods, hire a dozer and an operator. In the end, it will cost you a lot less time, money, and aggravation. It is also safer. A dozer can create several half-acre to one-acre stands in a ten-hour day (depending on the size of the trees removed). Even if you need to hire a dozer for a couple of days, it is worth the money.

Plots created and surrounded by the cover of woods are secure and a major attraction to deer and other wildlife. You can also have a dozer create differently shaped plots. You can have a long and narrow strip 20 yards wide by 100 or more yards long, or a square, round, rectangular, or even a zigzag-shaped plot. All of these types of plots in areas of cover make deer feel comfortable when feeding in them because with one jump, they can be back in the safety of the surrounding cover.

BROADCASTING BY HAND

If you believe you can plant healthy crops that will produce nutrition and tonnage for your deer by simply broadcasting seeds over the solid ground—boy do I have a bridge to sell you! With that said,

there are some instances when you can broadcast seed, but only on ground that has been prepared to accept the seedlings (if you want them to grow to the best of their potential).

When you decide to become a food-plot planter and begin the work to reclaim fields or woodlot clearings, the very next step is to recognize that using the right tools for the job at hand is a crucial element of planting success. Using a 35-HP tractor with large attachments to plant a small plot in the middle of a woodlot is overkill and not practical. Neither would it be realistic for you to use a rake and seeder to plant a five-acre field of clover!

The prudent thing to do before you begin your plantings is to think through exactly what type of equipment will work best on your land, provide you top quality crops, and will offer you the least amount of labor. Also think about what equipment you can afford to purchase without breaking the bank or getting a divorce.

Over and over again, I have witnessed sportsmen get frustrated or even give up on planting food plots because they don't know what equipment to use to plant the crops they want to grow. Many of them take the "broadcast by hand" advice too literally. While broadcasting seed over bare ground works at times, it never works as well as when you prepare the ground before seeding.

If you have small areas to plant by hand, the best advice I can give you is to understand that, in order to grow a crop that will provide nutritional value and maximum tonnage, there will be some labor involved. In some instances, the labor you put into some plots can be downright back-breaking. It should be noted here that the more work you put into planting a plot, the more you will get out of it and that is a hard-core fact.



When planting seeds in a small plot of up to one acre using a seeder like this, is much better than a hand seeder as it will broadcast the seed further and more evenly.

For instance, if I'm planting a small quarter acre or smaller spot that I want to clear out in the woods, I begin by thinking through everything I will need in the way of equipment to make the plot grow to its maximum potential. I always take a sturdy hand rake with iron claws to spots like this. It will quickly help me determine



This long narrow strip was cleared by hand and planted with clover. It is 50 yards from one of our fields. It is protected by woods on all sides and is regularly used by bucks during the hunting season that wait until low light or dark to enter the fields.

how much work will be involved in planting a plot in a rocky or root-filled area in the woods.

You can determine what type of plot you will have by "test-raking" the area. Rake two or three places within the given area you want to plant. If a majority of the spots you rake cause the teeth of the rake to constantly get hooked up on a lot of large or strong roots of trees or turn up rock after rock, you can be sure this will be an area that will take a lot of energy and time to prepare in order for it to grow seeds correctly. If you do not find a lot of rocks just an inch or so under ground and the tree roots are not getting caught

on your rake teeth, the area may be a prime spot for planting as long as the soil pH is not extremely low. (You can ignore roots of low brush when testing the spot because they are easier to pull up and don't require the hard labor needed to remove tree roots.)

Good choices of equipment include a soil test kit, a strong leaf rake, a sturdy garden rake with iron teeth, a heavy four-pronged pitch fork, a sharp, pointed spade, a large pair of pruning shears, a small hand-held pair of pruning shears, a chain saw, a hand-held or two-wheeled seeder, and a seed compacter (something as simple as a piece of fence with a cinder block and rope to pull over the planted area to smooth it out). You will also need a small hand-held weed killer and fertilizer spreader.

Once the soil is broken up and raked, make sure to rake it over

several more times in order to make the soil as loose as possible. The finer the soil is before you plant it, the better it allows the seed to germinate and grow. Of course, it should not be so fine that it will blow off after a strong wind. The next step is to remove all the remaining roots that you find up to a depth of about a half-inch to just below the surface. You can cut them back with the pruning shears as the rake pulls them free from the ground. Also, remove as many large rocks from the area as possible. Do not get rock crazy here. You're not looking to build a stone wall with the rocks. It is not necessary to remove stones that are smaller than the size of an open hand, unless they are at the surface and easy to rake away.

Once the soil in the plot begins to look like a small garden patch and the soil breaks easily in your hands, it is ready for the next step. Fill your weed-killer with a solution that will eliminate all the unwanted weeds and other growth in the area you have raked. Make sure you spray it thoroughly, not only in the plot but along the borders of the plot as well. Spray broadleaf and grass weeds. This will prevent weeds, roots, and other unwanted plant material from invading your plot and taking it over as the seeds grow. Don't use weed killer if you know it is going to rain within a day or two of spraying because it will lessen the destruction of the weeds and other unwanted plant material.

Check your spot a week or so later. If the unwanted plant material is brown and looks dead you are ready for the next step. If not, you may have to repeat the weed killing process again. Once you are satisfied that the weeds are controlled, it is advisable to take the garden rake and rake the area again as it will probably have



We hand cleared this planting lane of all brush, small trees, large rocks and tree roots with a chain saw, pruning shear and back labor and then raked the soil and planted it with clover.



I use this lime spreader on my small plots. If you have large fields to lime of five acres or more, then hiring a lime truck to spread your lime is more practical.

considerable amount of lime in order to change the soil's pH. It also takes time. If you lime an area in hopes of having the soil's pH benefit from the lime within a few weeks or even months, you're fooling yourself. It takes a lot of lime and at least six months for lime to do its job correctly. But, to start a plot, even with slightly acidic soil, it's worth it.

To plant in a clearing you have made in the woods, in an overgrown reclaimed field, or in an old field of grass, you will need to consider abandoning the hand tools for an ATV with small planting attachments.

The bottom line about planting any crop and making it worth the time, money, and hard work you pour into it, is "plant it right and they will come!" Any seed you put in the ground should be put in the ground and not on top of it. You

hardened at the surface since the last time you raked it.

Now it is time to lime the area heavily in order to get the pH to the desired level (which your soil test kit determined when you started the plot). If the soil sample is less than 6.0, the soil is acidic and may not be beneficial or it can even be toxic to some species of plants that you might use. You should try to get the pH to about 6.0 or ideally 7.0 which is neutral. Once you have accomplished that, only then can you move to the next step of putting lime in the plot.

No matter what you read or hear, this is a fact: It takes a considerable amount of lime in order to change the soil's pH. It also takes time. If you lime an area in hopes of having the soil's pH benefit from the lime within a few weeks or even months, you're fooling yourself. It takes a lot of lime and at least six months for lime to do its job correctly. But, to start a plot, even with slightly acidic soil, it's worth it.



We cleared this spot of low lying brush and second growth and fertilized and limed it for a year before planting it.

will get a much better crop when you break the soil and plant the seed under the freshly broken earth to the proper depth (as noted on the bag) and then smooth over the rough soil as gently as possible.

MEDIUM SIZE MACHINES

There is no doubt in my mind that a vast majority of you do not have unlimited funds for purchasing planting equipment. Most of you will opt for using an ATV and planting attachments. I can tell you—without hesitation—there is nothing wrong with using ATVs and attachments to plant your ground. In fact, I used them exclusively for a few years before I decided to move up to a Kubota tractor. In fact, I still use my Arctic Cat to get into tight spaces where my tractor won't go.

If your budget or the size of your land and the plots you are planting do not require a tractor, then buy yourself a quality ATV with enough horsepower to pull disk harrows, brush hogs, grass cutters, compactors, and other heavy attachments. Most of you will plant several one-quarter acre to half-acre plots in woodlot clearings, long clover patches in the woods, in small fields, or reclaim overgrown grass fields. If that sounds like your land—then my friend—you will have to invest in several pieces of equipment in order to do the job right and not to lose the investment you make in time, money, seed, and labor.

I use an Arctic Cat 4x4 550, 650, and 700 cc and a Land Pride Plot Ranger. They are must-have pieces of equipment for me on my place. Whatever brand ATV you purchase, make sure it will pull an attachment that will disk the ground, seed, compact the soil, mow, and much more. Land Pride is a company that makes all types of farm attachments. Recently, however, they developed a planter specifically designed for outdoorsmen who want to plant food plots but don't need a tractor and large



For deer managers with smaller farms, Land Pride's Treker and Plot Ranger are the perfect combination to make short work of your planting chores (www.landpride.com). (credit: Land Pride)

attachments to do so. Land Pride designed and brought to market the Plot Ranger. The Plot Ranger is also designed to be used in tight spaces as well as in open areas. The unit comes with a seeder, tiller, and compactor and also has options for other attachments as well. You can check out the Plot Ranger out at www.landpride.com.

Don't kid yourself. If you are going to take planting crops seriously and don't have either the budget or the need for a tractor, you will need an ATV and a Plot Ranger (or a similar type of unit) to get the job done right. It pays to spend a little extra money to buy the right tools. Because if you don't, not only will you waste time and effort, your crops will not grow to their potential. ATVs and quality attachments are very effective tools for planting food plots. Just be sure to give them the maintenance they deserve and warrant for performing the hard work of planting crops. A machine and its attachments will only work as well as you take care of them.

SMALL TRACTORS

For a variety of reasons, including buying larger property or having land with a lot of agricultural fields to plant, the time may come when you want to move up to a tractor. When it comes to planting and tilling large acreage, turning old fields into crop-producing



We finally made the decision to get a Kubota model L4240 42.0 hp for planting our 41 acres of fields. Our Kubota is our pride and joy. Speaking of pride, the attachment is a Land Pride brush hog.

pastures, removing large rocks from fields with a bucket loader, or pushing down brush on your property, the practical land manager understands that the wisest move is to invest in a 25- to 50-horsepower tractor when the time and budget allows.

Tractors are reliable pieces of equipment that make the job quicker and easier. But there are many choices. Agricultural tractors are large, heavy-duty machines suited more toward commercial farming than food plot planting. The smaller utility tractors are less powerful but are

built to withstand much of the same hard work their larger brothers do only on a smaller scale. Then there are the really small tractors called “compact” tractors. These units are for guys who own 100 acres of land (with about 20 percent tillable fields). They are less powerful than both the agricultural and utility tractors but they can still get the job done as long as they aren’t used on large tracts of land.

The best feature tractors offer is the Power Take Off (PTO). A PTO enables the tractor to drive implements such as brush cutters, post-hole diggers, and wood chippers. Tractors also have several types of tires that help it work better in different types of soil. An important “optin” to consider when getting any tractor is to purchase one with four-wheel drive.

The utility and compact tractors (like our Kubota) are small-farm friendly and will enable you to develop and grow the very best possible food plots as well. Small tractors and attachments like a disk harrow (tiller), hay and brush cutter, a one- or two-point plow, brush hog, spraying rig, bucket loader and a primary seeder and compactor are good start-up choices of equipment attachments. I like Land Pride attachments. They have performed well for me on my farm and I work the heck out of them. I also use a Plot Ranger by Land Pride for planting in tight places like small clearings in the woods.



Having a Power Take Off (PTO) feature enables the tractor to drive rotary implements.

No matter what you decide to plant with, an ATV with attachments, a tractor, or even by hand, I highly recommend getting a utility vehicle (when your budget can afford it). They are the most useful non-planting vehicle you can own when you have a lot of acreage to plant and woods to maintain. Both Land Pride and Kubota offer top-of-the-line units that are tough and are designed to get the job done. Work on the farm you being able to depend on a work horse of a machine. A good utility vehicle should be able to



Land Pride and Kubota offer sturdy and reliable utility vehicles called the Treker 20 Series and Kubota RTV series. Check both out at www.kubota.com and www.landpride.com. (credit: Land Pride)

hold plenty of planting equipment (shovels, rakes, bags of seed, fertilizer, lime, etc.) and (later in the year) hunting equipment, hunters and harvested deer, too. I have a Kubota RTV and Leo bought a Land Pride Treker 20 Series in camo. You will get years of service from these work-horse machines. As an added bonus, they are also capable of pulling most planting attachments too.

You can check out the utility vehicles mentioned at www.kubota.com or www.landpride.com. Pay your local dealer a visit. If they are like the folks I deal with at Pine Bush Equipment, they will give you the best advice available and will help you make the right choice in purchasing the type of equipment that will work best for your land, needs, and budget.

Now that you have chosen the type of equipment you need for planting, there are very specific steps you must use before planting even a single seed. Next, you must decide where to put your food plots. This is an often overlooked element of QDM. Depending on what you are planting, consider the soil content, the amount of runoff the plot has to deal with, how it lies in relationship to prevailing winds and your stand locations, etc. With an aerial photograph of your land (you can start with Google maps), mark out the different plots and what you think you would like to plant.

Next, before planting, start the process for growing crops that will provide maximum nutrition and yield (known as tonnage) for the time and work that will be invested. To do this, you must commit to following specific planting guidelines of all plantings.

TEST YOUR SOIL FIRST

Exactly what is a soil test? That may seem like a no-brainer of a question to you. But it is surprising how many people actually don't know the complete answer to that question. A soil test is a method a lab uses to chemically remove the elements from your soil

(phosphorus, potassium, calcium, magnesium, sodium, sulfur, manganese, copper, and zinc) and then determines how well a plant or plants will grow with the available elements found in your soil. The quantity of available nutrients in the sample determines the amount of fertilizer that should be added to improve the soil. A soil test also calculates the soil pH levels, which include humic matter and exchangeable acidity. This analyses will determine if lime is needed and, if so, how much to apply to the soil.

So is it really important to get a soil test? You bet it is. It encourages plant growth by telling you exactly how much lime and fertilizer you need. In the end, this will save you time and, more importantly, money! I often wind up seeing growers guess how much lime and fertilizer is needed. This is a real common error made by a lot of food plot planters. If you use too much lime for instance, the pH levels may get too high. When the pH levels are too high, this may cause the nutrients like iron, manganese, boron, copper, and zinc to become less available to plants! Therefore, applying too much lime and fertilizer not only isn't going to grow better crops it is also cost ineffective. By simply using a soil sample report, you will be able to eliminate the guessing-game aspect. In addition, many food plot planters don't realize just how much lime it takes to raise the pH levels. Tons are required per acre. Most times, I see folks apply several bags of lime per acre and that has little affect on soil pH.

Start by taking a small soil sample of each area you intend to plant. You do not need a lot of soil. Most places only test a table-spoon of soil to get the pH level. It is important, however, that you

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Complete Soil Analysis for pH,
Phosphorus, Potassium, Calcium,
Magnesium, Organic Matter, %
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A fertilizer recommendation
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will be sent to you.

This kit makes getting soil samples and fertilizer results quick, easy, inexpensive and accurate. They are available in Wal-Mart and other sporting good retailers.

get soil from a few inches below the surface. Then send your soil sample to your local farm supply dealer or to any of the seed companies that sell signature seeds. A company like Crop Production Services (CPS) has locations in 16 states nationwide. If you live anywhere east of Iowa, CPS may be a source for you to work with.

Sending your sample to a company called Building Whitetail



This is all the soil you will need to send to a lab for them to take an accurate readin of your soil's nutrients.

Paradise™ is another option. They sell soil test kits that are available in most sporting stores, as well as Wal-Mart. You can take a sample of your soil and send it to them and they will analyze it for phosphorus, potassium, calcium, magnesium, and organic matter. They will send your information back to you in short order for very reasonable rates.

A word of caution here, most hand-held pH testers I have purchased for about \$20 didn't consistently provide accurate pH levels. When I did a test by comparing their results to the results of a lab, the soil samplers were slightly off. If you do want to use a hand-held pH tester, they are available at Cabela's, Bass Pro Shops, Gander Mountain, and other retailers. It is the simplest and easiest way to test your soil quickly without having to send the soil out to a lab. But for total accuracy, I would recommend using a lab.

The key here is to be sure your pH levels are as close to neutral (7.0) as possible. Remember that lime takes time to absorb into the soil and the best results are only realized after a year or so. Although there are some minor positive results quicker than that. Once you have limed the soil, you can prepare for the next step to successful planting. To avoid choking, coughing, burning eyes and getting lime everywhere but where you want it (including in all the working parts of your equipment), you may want to use lime pellets instead of powdered lime (although I have always gone the choking, coughing, and burning eyes way).

No matter what method you choose to test your pH levels,

remember that it is the first step to growing the very best crops you can grow. It will help you improve your germination, help to quickly establish the food plot stand, improve forage and yields, and help what you plant last longer.

SOIL PREPARATION

It is also important to know what minerals your soil is lacking. Once you know you, can accurately plan on what minerals to use to enhance your soil. Remember, putting minerals on top of the soil is unlawful in some states like New York. When I add minerals, I have my farm supply company dump tons on my fields and then I immediately turn them under the soil. Enhancing your mineral content will not only help to grow better crops, it will also quickly help you deer herd's overall health. It will help develop better antler growth on the bucks that live on and around your property!

Each crop you grow also requires specific types of fertilizer (nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium—also known as N-P-K) in order for it to grow to its maximum potential. Crops require these elements in the largest amounts and thus they form the basis of most commercial fertilizers. For instance, an average one-acre plot of turnips requires about 200 pounds or more of 19-19-19 (for every 100 pounds of fertilizer there are 19 pounds of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium) topped off with about 100 pounds of ammonium sulfate. Nitrogen is the key element for plant protein production. Calcium and phosphorus are essential building block elements for antler growth, bone, milk, and body growth for deer. So, including these elements in your soil is very important not only for the deer, but the plants as well.

If you grow corn you need



Spreading minerals even on top of your soil is not legal in some states. Before you put minerals in or on the ground, check with the laws in your state.

to feed it nitrogen. This is a necessary element for healthy foliage and stem growth. It is also crucial in helping make the corn stalks and leaves look a healthy green instead of yellow—nitrogen promotes dark green-leaf color. Phosphorus is an important nutrient for promoting better root development and flower production. Potassium helps in metabolism and helps the plant make food. You can plainly see why these elements are so important to your crops.

Most legumes like clover contain a legume bacterium (rhizoid). If not, they must be inoculated before planting the seed. If they are not inoculated, they cannot form the root nodules necessary to fix nitrogen from the air and the result will be poor growth potential. Inoculates are simply different types of bacteria that certain plants require mixed into their seeds prior to planting them. There are many different types of bacteria including *sinorhizobium*, *meliloti*, *rhizobium*, *I.b.trifollii*, *bradyrhizaobium spp* and so on. Knowing which bacterium your plant needs is crucial to its growing success. For instance, white clover which is considered the filet mignon of all the clover seeds, requires rhizobium, *I.b.trifollii* bacterium to grow best. You can purchase a lot of seeds that come already inoculated. If the seed isn't inoculated, then you can purchase the correct bacteria to add to your seed before you plant it.

SPRAY FOR WEED CONTROL

The next step is the most crucial element to growing hardy crops. Without it, not even lime, fertilizer, or minerals will help your plants grow to their maximum potential. I'm referring to weeds that overtake the crops. By fertilizing and liming, you not only help your crops growth potential, you also help the weeds grow better. So without a sound thought-out plan to control weeds in your food plots, nothing—and I mean absolutely nothing—will hinder the growth, height, tonnage, and nutrition of the crops you plant more than weeds and unwanted native grasses.

Weeds will compete with your crops and win over any planted area that is not sprayed properly prior to planting every time. The best time to spray is after the weeds and native grasses have had a chance to grow a few inches tall. You will get the best results by spraying then. I usually spray the plots I plant twice. Once with a long spray unit with multi spraying heads that attaches to my Arctic

Cat ATV and then I spray the growing weeds and grasses as heavily as possible (according to directions). If I see some random weeds and grasses have grown over the next week, then I spot spray any unwanted native grasses and weeds that I may have missed the week earlier with a hand-held backpack unit. Each time I try to plan it when there will not be rain over the next few days and when there is either little or no wind. Keep in mind, that some of the more recent weed killers allow you to spray as long as it doesn't rain for several hours after you spray. But, they are more expensive and weed killer is expensive to begin with! Even with that said, don't be stingy when you apply weed killer by trying not to use what the directions recommend. The more weeds you kill, the better your crop will be.



To get the best results when weeding, we spray twice, once after tilling and more importantly again after the weeds have had a chance to grow two or three inches high.

It is also important to try to spray with the least amount of disturbance to the soil. Any time you turn the soil under, you encourage weeds and unwanted native grasses to grow. Till lightly and no deeper than the seed needs to be planted according to the directions to avoid over stimulating weed growth.

PLANTING CHOICES

Before planting your first crop, you have some more decisions to make. Are you planting to enhance the overall healthy body weight of your herd? Do you want to also improve antler growth? Is making sure your does and fawns have an early season, nutritious food source important? In other words, are you planning to take on a full QDM program by providing food sources year round for your deer or just in the fall?

If you're like a majority of hunters, you want to plant crops that will attract and hold deer in your area during the time of year that

is most beneficial to you—October and November. If that is the case, then I recommend planting fall type crops that will do well during cooler weather. You can also plant a couple of small clover patches and some other plantings for spring and summer—but your attention should mostly be on plots that produce or mature in the fall (see our website for the best seed ideas and plantings at www.woodswater.tv).

Once you decide what to plant, remember that the best time to plant is when you know there will be some rain in the near future.



This buck is what we dream about shooting. Providing a complete quality deer management program on your land including food plots, minerals, lime, watering holes, fruit trees, fertilizing oak trees, sanctuaries, wild grapes and more, a buck like this could be in your future! (credit: Ted Rose)

Make sure you follow the instructions on the bag—most folks don't and the crop suffers because of it. I like to plant annuals rather than a lot of perennials because I like to change up my plots every year to give the deer and other wildlife something new to eat. It keeps them interested in the area. Once the seed is in the ground (remember most seed doesn't like to be planted too deeply), you now have to think about keeping it fertilized for the best results.

Now that you have taken all the above steps, you need to decide what types of seeds, trees, shrubs and other food plots you want to grow. My strongest recommendation here is to think carefully before planting anything. Consider this, if all your neighbors are growing clover, chicory, corn, and turnips—then your best bet to attract and hold deer on your land is to grow different types of crops along with much smaller plots that include the crops your neighbors are growing! To entice deer to your property from surrounding lands, and to keep your resident herd from leaving your property you must grow things they cannot find elsewhere.

On my farm, I grow soybeans, a wide variety of vegetables like carrots, chufa, sunflowers birds' foot trefoil, winter wheat, and turnips. I also plant a lot of shrubs that deer like to munch on that cannot be found on any of the neighbor's properties or, for that matter, anywhere within a two square mile radius of our land. I make sure to plant plots of what the farmers grow too, including corn, alfalfa and clover.

Here are some crop ideas that you may consider. I like to plant legumes (a seed pod, or other edible part of a leguminous plant used as food). I found the soybean is the best bet as long as you have enough land to plant at least three to five acres. I also like to plant winter peas.

I also like to plant crops, trees and shrubs that leave a vapor trail from their fruits, nuts, berries, leaves, and grasses. Some choices here are all of the fruit and mast trees, many different types of shrubs, grape vines, alfalfa (ever notice how fast deer will hit a freshly mowed alfalfa field?-many times only minutes after it has been cut), chicory, deer greens, rape, turnip, kale, mustard, and carrots. They are all easy to grow and all have a distinct odor that deer cannot resist. There is a chapter following this one that discusses crops that produce attractive food odors that pull deer in like magnets.



Tall-growing sunflowers are one of the easiest crops to grow. They provide deer and other wildlife plenty of calories and oil for healthy body development. They also attract honey bees that help pollinate other crops on your land including wild fruit trees.

Now I know a lot of you have read that corn doesn't provide a lot of nutrition for deer and hence it should not be given a lot of attention. If you have enough fields, trust me, plant corn—despite what other pros have said about corn not being a valuable food crop. Corn is one of the best fall crops to attract deer. It



Deer love apples but they go wild over pears. If you plant several trees, be sure to protect the bark from bucks rubbing it, fertilize, spray for harmful insects and prune when necessary and in a few short years they will bear fruit.

Don't forget that natural vegetation can also help you improve your deer and deer hunting. For instance, I was the first to write about fertilizing white oak trees in an article in 1983. By simply planting spikes around a tree with a trunk about 16 inches wide or larger, you can encourage that tree to produce larger, sweeter, and more abundant acorns when other trees aren't producing acorns at all! Even in good mast-producing years, your fertilized trees will do better than the other trees.

With a pinch bar, poke holes around the tree where the drip line is. The drip line is directly under the end of the longest branches. Put a dozen or more spikes in the ground around the tree. Break the spikes in half, but do not crush them up. Then cover the soil. I suggest doing this twice a

provides nutrients to deer this time of year, too. Whenever the temperature drops below 28 degrees, deer quickly move off to the corn fields to raise body temperatures and to get needed nutrients from the corn. If you plant corn, spend a little extra money to buy Round-Up ready corn. That way, after it starts growing, you can continue to spray it to keep the weeds from competing with it. Other Round-Up ready crops are also beneficial to plant for the same reason (soybean, etc.).



This is one of my corn fields. Corn is one of the best crops to attract and hold deer in fall during hunting season. They use it for cover and food. We leave it standing after the season is over to provide a winter food source.

year: once in the spring and again in the fall. I usually wait until I know there will be some rain soon after I put the spikes in the soil.

This is one of the best ways to produce acorns that are not only bigger, sweeter, and more abundant, but will also remain on the branches longer because they are healthier. That means when most of the acorns have fallen and been consumed by deer, bear, and turkey, your tree will be dropping mast later in the fall during hunting season!

You can also do this with a lot of natural vegetation like wild grape vines, berry bushes, and other types of plants that deer consume throughout the summer and fall. Find out what plants you have, then ask your local farm store what the best mix of fertilizer is and apply it to the plant. It will increase production of your plants right away.

It also pays to fertilize any wild fruit tree you have. By doing so, you will increase the flavor, size, and abundance of the crop the tree makes. Again, use the right N-P-K mix.

Pruning wild fruit trees, vines, and bushes helps. You should only do this when they are asleep (dormant) in the winter from January through March. If you prune any later than March, you could send the tree or plant into shock and not achieve your goal.

DEER & HABITAT MANAGEMENT

Planting food plots is only half the equation when it comes to QDM. Just as important is the other half of the blueprint which includes proper management of the habitat on your land, deer management and observation, and hunter management. When these



Fertilizing your oak trees will provide bigger, sweeter and more plentiful acorns starting with the first year. By the third year, the tree is so healthy the stems of the acorns hang on longer, falling later than the acorns on other oaks—mostly during the hunting season!

other elements are combined with growing quality food plots they help to lower the over-browsing of native forage so that it has a much better chance to regenerate.

This is another subject that requires a lot more space than I can fairly give in this book, but it is necessary to touch base on it here as well. This is only a summary of what is needed to provide a true management program, but it will help you understand that an overall QDM program must include a detailed agenda of deer and habi-



By undertaking a long-term QDM program you will see more bucks each time you go afield in just a few short years. By allowing yearlings and 2½ year olds to pass, it won't be long before you set your sights on a buck like this. (credit: Ted Rose)

tat management of both natural and planted vegetation. It must also consider the overall buck population, the doe population, and most importantly (in my mind's eye), hunter satisfaction.

What is the most important step in deer management? Well, that really depends on your goals. You probably want to see and shoot more bucks on the land you lease or own. And that probably means not shooting yearling bucks and,

in some cases, even two-year-old bucks. Most hunters want to be able to take bucks that have eight points or better and have racks that have 16- to 18-inch inside spreads. This is a tall order for sure—but a surprisingly easy one if you follow stringent guidelines.

The most critical aspect is simple—let the smaller yearlings and even two-year-olds go and they will grow! Seems like an easy thing to understand and do but it isn't. After a little pressure of not seeing a buck the first few days of the season, most hunters soon cave-in and take the first legal buck that passes them. This is not a crime and no one should frown on what another man's trophy is. With that said, however, if you are undertaking a true QDM program, this is one way to not only kill the buck but also any hopes of improving the age-class and rack-size of the bucks on the land you hunt.

I bet that most of you, like me, daydream about seeing a lot of bucks during the bow and firearm season. Those dreams include

taking a mature buck. Remember that a mature 3½ year old buck in New York is not what a mature buck is in Wisconsin. A 3½ year old buck in the east may only have eight points, a 16-inch wide rack and weigh in at 180 pounds field dressed. The same age buck in Wisconsin may have ten points, an 18-inch wide rack and dress out at more than 200 pounds.



No matter which of these bucks a hunter decides to shoot, both should be thought of as equal trophies. (credit: Ted Rose)

In any event, seeing a lot of bucks and taking a racked buck is what gets our adrenalin flowing. If that is your goal—then you must commit to allowing yearling bucks to pass and to create habitat that also protects them. As many of you know, it isn't fun when you go hunting and don't see deer. It becomes downright disheartening when you go days or even a season without seeing a buck! Every hunter I know wants to see deer almost every time they go afield

The fact is, in order for that to happen yearling bucks must be allowed to live in order to become two-year-olds and older. The more yearling bucks that are given the opportunity to develop a healthy body and, more importantly, the experience to survive future hunting seasons.



The ultimate dream for any deer hunter is to be able to see a group of bucks like this on the land he or she hunts.

With each passing season, bucks become smarter and more physically fit. They quickly become players in the deer world. They can challenge for the right to breed once they are 2½ years old. They leave their sign (rubs and scrapes) all over the deer woods trying to demonstrate to other bucks they are contenders.

Biologists say that if about 30 to 35 percent of a herd is made up of mature bucks, all the aspects of the rut become more visible and intense. That breaks down to hunters seeing more daytime activity of bucks chasing does and responding to antler rattling (as bucks spar and fight with each other). There is more vocalization between bucks which helps hunters have more success using grunts and other deer calls. There are more scrapes and rubs throughout the woods—leaving hunters feeling excited with anticipation of a successful season.

When there are many mature bucks in a herd, more bucks end up surviving the rut, especially after a hard winter. If there are fewer mature bucks to breed, the available bucks undergo a severe decline in their body weight (often not eating during the peak of the rut), thereby becoming much more susceptible to predation and starvation. They will lack the proper health to make it through the winter. Having a good mix of mature bucks also takes the pressure off these bucks, allowing them to keep weight on and maintaining good health to make it past a hard winter. In the end, this means a greater winter survival of mature males, which breaks down to a more enjoyable hunting season the following year.

I know a lot of hunters who use the excuse that spikes have to be removed from the herd because they have bad genetics. Don't let anyone convince you that spikes have inferior genetics. It just isn't always true. A small yearling spike, especially a late-born spike, can turn into a terrific buck if given the chance to become a two or three year old. Many researchers and deer breeders have told me they have seen many spikes develop racks that range from 140- to 170-class size antlers! Let your yearling spikes go. If you really conform to a buck management program, you will also let four-, six- and eight-point yearling bucks pass as well. I know, right about now many of you are saying, "What?! That might be the only buck I'll see all season." If you can develop the willpower to let yearlings go, you will see more bucks the following year. Even if your neighbors are taking a few of them, the ones you save will help.

On our farm, our policy is not to shoot any bucks with fewer than eight points. In addition, we try hard, although we don't always succeed, to also identify age class as well. If we see an eight point with a 14-inch wide rack and he has the body of a young buck, we

let him pass. We know we may be taking a yearling that could be a real “taker” the following season. Sometimes we have been fooled by an eight-point that has a 115- to 120-class rack and appears to be 2½ years old. In this case, he turned out to be a yearling, but this has only happened twice over the last five years. Mistakes happen, but if you can limit them and let yearlings get a year or two under their belts, it won’t take but a couple of seasons to see more and larger bucks on your property.

It is not only important to let yearlings walk, you must also provide them with the type of protective habitat that will encourage them to remain on your land. Make them stay on your property, rather than having them seek security on the neighbor’s property—especially if the neighbor is close-minded and knuckle-headed about allowing yearlings to survive.

If the land you lease or hunt doesn’t offer a lot of secure cover—create it for them! It is easy to do. In one season, you can develop cover by stacking a lot of dead blow downs in several areas of the land. You can plant fast-growing shrubs like bayberry, beach plum, elderberry, locust, buttonbush, high bush cranberry, willow, dogwood, serviceberry, nannyberry, and elderberry. There are trees that grow rapidly to provide thick cover in a few short years like poplar, eastern red cedar, white pine, and white cedar. It also pays to put in some food-source trees like wild apple, pear, and crabapple. All of these plantings will aid to help safely hide yearlings.

On a longer term plan, creating a mixed conifer forest is also a good way to hold deer on your land and provide cover from hunting pressure, weather, and predators. It takes longer to mature, but a mixed conifer forest is a real plus. It provides yearlings a way to



Spike bucks can develop into anything from a 16-inch 8-point at 3½ years old to a ten-point or more at that age. That’s one good reason to let them pass!

(credit: Ted Rose)



Any QDM program includes a plan to plant conifers.

get through the season on your land. On our farm, I started to plant conifers three years ago. I dedicated one of my large fields (about five acres) to the development of conifers. I planted a mix of fast-growing white pines and a slower-growing species of conifers including red, scotch, and pitch pine as well as Norway spruce, white spruce, Douglas fir, and Austrian pine. In a short five years, this

planting will hide many deer. In ten years, it will help the deer on my farm evade hunting pressure, and it will also attract deer from my neighbor's lands, especially as a winter storm front approaches.

It is impossible for me to give you all the details you need or want in this book to help you grow quality deer plots and create deer and habitat management goals. However, I hope the information I did give you regarding these subjects has at least made you understand that growing food plots and committing to a deer and habitat management plan takes a long-term pledge as well as a lot of time and work.

It will also require an upfront investment and the right planting tools. Moreover, it will require a considerable investment in lime, fertilizer, seed, and additional minerals, equipment repair and maintenance, shrub and tree plantings, and habitat improvement as well. When it comes to undertaking a complete QDM program of deer and habitat management along with food plots and woodlot management, the amount of time, money, labor, and commitment you plant is what you will sow. Letting yearlings and young bucks pass is what will make you a happy hunter and a true deer manager as well.

Here is a sample chart where you can keep accurate records of your food plot plantings. It contains important bits of information that you can refer to year after year. I found this format to be helpful and I know it will help you in your food plot endeavors, too.

FOOD PLOT RECORD

PLOT NAME: Big View PLOT SIZE: 2 acres YEAR PLANTED: 2006

SOIL TEST DATE: April 5, 2006

RESULTS OF TEST: 6.5 pH

LIME APPLIED (lbs./acre): 300 lbs. (150 lbs. per acre)—Soil tested slightly acidic (which turnips like). So I only used 300 lbs. to remain at 6.5 pH

DATE OF APPLICATION: April 15, 2006

FERTILIZER APPLIED (lbs./acre): 600 lbs. of 19-19-19 (300 lbs./acre)—I also plan to use 150 lbs. of ammonium sulfate (34-0-0) in a couple of months to help increase crop production.

DATE OF APPLICATION: April 30, 2006

TYPE OF SOIL PREPARATION: Disk Harrowed—Land Pride Model DH10

TYPE OF SEED PLANTED: Turnip (Brassica Rapa)

PLANTING RATE: 4 lbs. per acre

DEPTH OF SEED: one-quarter inch below surface level

PLANTING METHOD: Gravity-Fed Primary Seeder with Cultipacker Disks—Land Pride Model PS1572

WEED CONTROL: Roundup® Super Concentrate Plus - Systemic Grass & Broadleaf Killer. Applied according to directions on container.

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

Judging by the success I had with my one-acre turnip crop last year, I've decided to double the size of the food plot this year. Deer fed continually on this crop throughout the fall and into December. I noticed that as soon as we had severe frost, deer activity picked up considerably, and they actively removed the turnips from the ground; eating the bulbs and roots after the frost. This is due to a chemical change that occurs within the bulbous head of the turnip. In cold weather, starches change to sugar compounds. I also noticed that the top growth survived until the temperatures dropped below 15 degrees. It has taken the deer two years to figure out what the turnips are, but now that they have, I expect this year to be the best year ever regarding their attraction to the crop. It has proven to be an excellent cool and even cold-season planting, bringing deer into the food plot long after some of our other plants withered due to frost. I plan to keep turnips as a staple crop in our plantings until I see the deer begin to ignore them—which I do not expect.



Turnips are a like candy to deer, especially after a heavy frost when they contain much more sugar.