

Four Factors in Food Plot Location

By Jason Snavely

Oftentimes when I am working with hunters to help them choose the best location for a new food plot, they will ask me, “Why put a food plot *here* when my stand is over on the ridge by that clearing?”

As a deer manager, my universal food plot goal is to produce high-quality plots that are strategically located where use by deer is high but capitalization on our efforts by poachers or uncooperative neighbors is low. My strategy for identifying optimal locations for food plots has always focused on four core considerations: soil quality, existing deer travel patterns, proximity to dense cover, and neighbors. These four considerations ensure I achieve my universal goal, to produce high-quality food plots (a function of soil quality) that are strategically located (existing travel patterns) where use by deer is high (proximity to cover) but capitalization on our efforts by poachers or uncooperative neighbors is low. I’m typically not happy until all four of these components are addressed in the food plots and properties I manage. Depending on the specific scenario, I may be willing to sacrifice on one to really nail the other three, but in general all four are equally important. Let’s take a look at each.

Soil Quality

Soil is the medium for plant growth, and animals satisfy their need for dietary minerals from plants that grow in it. Forage crops are simply transfer agents conveying nutrients from the soil into the animals that consume the crops. The quality of your deer herd is a direct function of the quality of their diet, and the quality of the food plot crops you cultivate (and the native vegetation) is a direct function of your soil condition and soil health. Soil quality can be improved, but it is also wise to choose food plot sites where soil quality is already high.

An underrated soil characteristic with food plotters is organic matter. Organic matter is the decaying plant and animal remains that accumulate in the topsoil. During decomposition, organic matter releases nutrients. The organic matter remaining after major portions of plant and animal residues have decomposed is known as humus. Humus is extremely valuable as it binds with soil particles and improves conditions where there is either too much moisture in the soil or too little. Note in the update on the Bowman Plot that the field with higher organic matter content, based on a soil test, requires less fertilizer and lime.

Most food plotters are also familiar with soil acidity, represented by the soil’s pH. Soil pH affects a plant’s ability to take up available nutrients, so pH directly impacts the quality of your food plots. You can correct acidity with lime, but choosing the right site may reduce or eliminate this need.

Get to know the soils on the property you manage. Acquire a soil survey map for your county by contacting your local USDA-NRCS office, or visit <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/>.

BOWMAN PLOT UPDATE

In the last issue of QW we introduced you to the Bowman Plot, a fallow field being renovated and converted into a food plot on a 250-acre tract in northeast Pennsylvania. Progress has been made in clearing the field with a bulldozer and preparing the seedbed.



The bulldozer has also been used to clear an access trail on the downwind side of the field (based on predominant wind direction in this location) to allow hunters to access stand sites in the area.

The field includes two distinct sections, narrowly separated by early successional cover. Following soil test results from early April, a decision has been made to treat the field as two distinct food plots – East Bowman and West Bowman. Test results revealed higher soil quality in East Bowman (see chart), so we decided to expedite planting of forage soybeans for warm-season nutrition and attraction this summer. Meanwhile, soils in West Bowman, including a ton of lime per acre, setting it up for a cool-season mix

	East Bowman	West Bowman
Crop:	forage soybeans	cool-season annuals
Org. Matter:	4.2%	3.6%
pH:	6.8	6.5
Add Lime:	0	2,000 lbs./acre
Add N:	0	30 lbs./acre
Add P:	30 lbs./acre	0
Add K:	70 lbs./acre	120 lbs./acre

of brassicas, winter peas and forage oats to be planted in August.

The proximity of these plots to large agricultural fields in the core of the property should set up a great hunting-season scenario. Deer using the large commercial bean and corn fields will hopefully be attracted to East Bowman’s soybeans, hidden in dense cover off the larger fields. These deer will continue to use the soybeans into hunting season while the adjacent cool-season annuals become established. Natural travel corridors of low-lying, dense cover already lead from the agricultural fields to the Bowman plots. Pockets and corners of early successional cover bordering both plots were left uncleared and will serve as staging areas or entry points for deer, creating stand sites for hunters.



Staging Area
This pocket of fallow brush in West Bowman was left uncleared to serve as “soft edge” that deer will likely use as an entry point to the plot, setting up potential stand sites.

Test Results
For West Bowman’s cool-season annuals, A&L Analytical Labs recommended a ton of lime per acre to raise the pH from 6.5 to 7.0, and 120 lbs./acre potash (K). East Bowman’s soils were stronger and will support an immediate planting of soybeans.

Existing Travel Patterns

More often than not, whitetails develop travel patterns consistent with terrain and edge habitat, but other landforms and habitat features can concentrate travel, such as narrow fingers of cover in otherwise open areas (or “bottlenecks”). Rub lines, heavily used game trails, and past hunting observations are all clues to the best areas for food plots. While deer may find and use a food plot located away from their preferred travel zones, situating a food plot near existing travel patterns makes immediate and continued use of the plot more likely. As we all know, the more time deer spend in a location of our choosing, the easier it is to create successful hunting locations.

Proximity to Cover

The presence, diversity and abundance of dense escape, thermal and fawning cover drives the year-round attractiveness of your property. Further, development and/or enhancement of this valuable component of whitetail habitat in an area in which it is lacking increases the level of uniqueness of your particular management area. When it comes to food plots, deer prefer to feed in areas where escape cover can be reached quickly. Evidence of this is seen in any agricultural field or large food plot, where browse pressure is usually highest along the edges. For cool-season



ERIC RUTHERFORD

Overlaying soil-quality information, travel corridors and bedding cover on an aerial map of your hunting land can help you identify the best sites for potential food plots.

plots designed for hunting, close cover increases deer use of the plot during daylight. It's also beneficial for deer to feel secure while feeding in your warm-season nutritional plots.

You can locate food plots close to existing cover, and you can also shape food plots so that a higher percentage of the field is close to cover – for example, long, narrow plots.

Neighbors

During your analysis of resources on your property, it's always good to determine what your limiting factors are. Over time, you may come to find that one or more of your neighbors are among the limiting factors. These are bordering properties where hunting pressure is high, QDM is not a goal, or both. In most cases, efforts to share the rewards of QDM and encourage neighbors to participate toward a common goal will be successful. But there are always a few exceptions. While we all share the whitetail resource, and those exceptional neighbors have just as much right to hunt their land as you do, we don't have to help them harvest the young bucks we are trying to protect. By locating high-quality food plots away from borders with non-QDM properties, you can help reduce the loss of yearling bucks to those properties.

But “neighbors” can also include people on public roads,

Continued.

STACK THE ODDS IN YOUR FAVOR IMPERIAL WHITETAIL FOOD PLOTS WORK.

When the Whitetail Institute started the food plot revolution over 20 years ago, hunters could finally plant something to actually produce a trophy buck. During this time the average annual number of Boone & Crockett and Pope & Young bucks has increased over 500%. The Whitetail Institute continues to lead the industry with quality research and quality products. Stack the odds in your favor with The Whitetail Institute...our food plots work.



The Whitetail Institute
239 Whitetail Trail
Pintlala, Alabama 36043

www.whitetailinstitute.com



FREE Trial Offer
Call 1-800-688-3030

Offer 1 - only \$6.95
(shipping and handling)

FREE all new 2009 DVD
FREE Imperial Clover™
(sample plants 100 sq. ft.)

Offer 2 - only \$19.95
(shipping and handling)

Same as Offer 1 PLUS:

FREE NO-Plow™

FREE Extreme™

FREE Alfa-Rack™ PLUS

FREE Chicory PLUS™

FREE Winter-Greens™

FREE Chic Magnet™

FREE Double-Cross™

(each sample plants 100 sq. ft.)

FREE 30-06™ Mineral (5 lbs.)

FREE Cutting Edge™

Supplement (5 lbs.)

some of whom may be tempted to trespass if high-quality food plots are visible from outside your borders. Again, locating plots away from, and out of sight of, borders with public roads will reduce this temptation.

I often refer to areas where bucks are lost to poaching or neighboring hunters as “negative funnels.”

Combining the Four Factors

Thinking about the four factors we’ve discussed here, roll out a large aerial of your hunting land. Mark on the map the location of your best soils, the known travel corridors, and the highest-quality cover. Note any “negative funnels” where immature bucks are not safe. When you get done analyzing your map,

prime sites for food plots should be revealed. If there are not any available forest openings in these prime areas, consider creating some through timber harvest or clearing, if that option is available to you. Existing fields and openings may offer high-quality soil, especially if they were farmed recently, but their location may not be optimal considering the other three criteria. With a little research, you may uncover new sites that address all four criteria, including high-quality soil.



About the Author: Jason R. Snavelly is a consulting wildlife biologist from Pennsylvania and owner of Drop-Tine Wildlife Consulting, a private food plot consulting and wildlife management firm that works with private and corporate landowners and hunting clubs.

ENGINEERED ATV FOOD PLOT EQUIPMENT!

CULTIPACKER

- Helps Improve Germination
- 48" Wide
- Flip Over Design
- Cast Iron Packer Wheels

ROUGH CUT MOWERS

- Mow Food Plots & Brush
- 44" & 57" Heavy Duty Deck
- 2"-8" Height Adjustment
- 17.5HP-23HP Engines

CHISEL PLOW

- Till Hard Ground
- 43" Wide
- Up To 6" Depths
- Electric Lift

For a free catalog and product DVD please call 815-539-6954 or visit www.kunzeng.com!

PUBLIC AUCTION

HUNTING LAND

1040 +/- CONTIGUOUS ACRES
WEST CENTRAL ILLINOIS
22 TRACTS
BROKER PARTICIPATION WELCOME
TROPHY MANAGED BY DR GRANT WOODS

WWW.NCPRESERVE.COM

MICHAEL LUTES **309.256.2767**
ILLINOIS LAND COMPANY mtlutes@gmail.com

Stop deer, wind & weeds from killing your seedlings

Plantra.com ▶

**Everything you need for
Planting Success™**

PLANTRA®

- Tree Tubes • Bark Protectors •
- Weed Mats • Fertilizer Packets •
- Deer Repellent •

© 2010 Plantra, Inc.

Advertise in the pages of Quality Whitetails!

Reach the most
targeted group of
Deer & Habitat
Managers
anywhere!

Mini-Ads are
Affordable and Effective!

(800) 209-3337

Laboratory Forensic Deer Aging Services

Costs less than
\$20.00
per animal!

Free tooth envelopes and personalized data
collection cards for commercial clients

Are you ready now to take the guessing game
out of aging your deer or other wildlife?

Did you know that every year a tooth in a mammal's jaw there is a layer of material called cementum deposited around the root? Those layers are just like the growth rings in a tree. That is the basis for what we do. Forensic Cementum Aging. Science and Research says molar wear aging does NOT work! Only takes 2 or 3 minutes to remove the two center incisors-Easy, Quick, Accurate! Ask for our free "How to Age Harvested Game Mammals"

Serving Ranchers, Wildlife Stewards & Hunters Throughout the World

512 756-1989 www.DeerAge.com

Comfort Breeds Success!

Cinn/Bow Xtreme
5' and 6'

Cinn Xtreme 4'
Diameter Blind

Options Available:
Ground Blind
5', 10' or 15' Tower
Ladder or Stairs
Texas Twister Seating System

RealBark®

HUNTING SYSTEMS

For a Complete Brochure Call:
1-800-256-4465
P.O. Box 2078
Henderson, TX 75653

Assembly Required • Patents Apply
www.realbark.com
DEALER INQUIRIES WELCOME