

Plotting with Natives

Establishing native grasses, forbs, shrubs and trees in strategic locations around your food plots may enhance daytime use of plots by mature bucks.

By Joe S. Reams III

When I was growing up, hunting deer with dogs was the name of the game in the flatwoods of the Florida Big Bend. I spent a lot of time at the hunting camp as a boy, learning a few bad but a lot of good things and making some pretty deep observations. One of the things I liked about being at the camp was listening to a recount of the day's events around the fire. The centerpiece of the discussion involved the escape or attempted escape route that the deer took during a race. Does and yearlings would stay just ahead of the dogs and run around in big circles. On the other hand a mature buck didn't waste a second making his way to the river in order to escape. Between him and the river was the buck's masterful use of the native landscape as he slipped through each block.

The sound of those hound dogs has long faded into the past for me, but the lessons I learned back then have proved useful in my career in native habitat restoration, mainly by feeding my curiosity about a deer's reaction to its native landscape.

You seek to produce mature bucks where you hunt, but you aren't raising mature bucks just to get pictures of them at night with a trail-camera. Many of us hunt our food plots in the fall, sitting in that stand religiously hoping a mature buck will show up and give us a shot. Suddenly, ambush becomes the operative word. Ambush involves deception, just like the camouflage clothes we wear, so we need to think creatively about ambush as we design our food plots.

My theory, which is being substanti-

ated by experience, is that by keeping native forage and browse species, along with strips of native warm-season grasses (NWSG) for cover, in or near food plots year round, deer become less guarded and use the plots more during daylight hours. We are using perennial native plants strategically to blur the lines between food plots and natural areas, and this seems to have directly led to an increase in mature buck sightings.

I'm sure you have heard someone speak or write about "the edge effect." This refers to the way deer and other animals

Above: The author, a native habitat restoration expert, looks over a stand of mixed native warm-season grasses and forbs growing on a client's property in south Georgia.

spend much of their time in transitional areas between different types or successions of vegetation. The edges allow animals to draw resources (food and cover) from two different areas. These are the areas where bucks spend most of their time, so it makes sense that we should make our food plots resemble these natural areas or edges.

Defining Native

To illustrate the case for native plants, I'll begin with a few definitions. The widely accepted definition of a native plant is one that occurred here before European colonization. Most plants growing in the wild are natives, but a large number are not. The vast majority of plants that cause problems are non-native. I like to say that our native plants "play well with others." That is to say they fit like pieces of a puzzle in their respective ecosystems, providing critical food and cover for the animals that inhabit them. They do not invade areas where they do not belong but are members of a functioning community.

Good Weeds and Bad Weeds

Weeds in food plots are not pretty to the farmer in all of us, and most deer managers insist on making their food plots like little farm fields. But the first step toward increasing year-round attraction in your food plots is learning to recognize the "weeds" that are desirable. In many cases, you may not need to plant a thing to create cover and natural forage in food plot corners, borders and strips. The plants are already present, you just need to stop mowing, spraying and disking them.

Weed control is a major expense in agriculture as they rob crops of water, nutrients and sunlight, contaminate the harvest and clog up harvesting equipment. As much as I despise them in my agricultural crops, I have much more tolerance for them in my food plots as long as they are not out-competing what I'm growing.

With a few exceptions most of the hated agricultural weeds are non-natives, such as sicklepod, nutsedge, crabgrass and others. Many of them find their way into our food plots and must be dealt with. There are also a handful of native plants that are considered weedy in agriculture, but they are different in a big way. They are extremely high-quality deer forage.

Examples of such plants in the Southeast are sida, ragweed and Florida

pusley. Ragweed and pusley are herbaceous plants or forbs that, because they are annuals, often show up in row-crop farming operations. Sida, or teaweed, is a shrubby perennial forb and is found growing in small stands where the soil isn't being plowed, like at pasture edges. This plant is very tolerant of shade, drought and heavy browsing and has been evaluated by the University of Florida for its potential as a food plot plant. One such selection of Sida likely to become commercially available this year has a crude protein level of over 30 percent. As you can see, it's important that you make sure that the weed you are spraying or disking is not a native forb that is actually providing your deer with free summer forage and could be useful in enhancing edges and corners left fallow. Many native species that emerge in fallow ground also offer good vertical structure.

On your hunting land growing wild are other perennial native forbs as well as shrubs and trees that supply your deer herd with the bulk of their diet. They are always moving from one kind of plant to another and many times going back to species they have browsed earlier in the year. Seeds and live plants of many of these are commercially available and not difficult to establish, so it makes really good sense to incorporate them into our food plots. Many are extremely high in protein and digestibility, and deer are naturally attracted to them. If managed properly these plants will only improve with time and should never have to be planted again. Once they take root and get established they are excellent insurance in dry weather when annuals fail or either it's too dry (or wet) to plant in the first place. These plants will be steadily providing forage throughout the growing season, and deer will begin to rely more on the presence of a consistent supply of food.

Native perennial forbs grow well from seed and include various wildflowers and legumes that deer absolutely love. Native legumes like certain ticktrefoils and lespedezas (not bicolor or sericea) as well as partridge pea are also very high in protein, are naturally preferred by deer for browsing, and the seeds are staples in the diet of bobwhite quail. The first two of these are perennial, and although partridge pea is an annual it is a vigorous reseeder and with a light late fall disking will emerge in late winter in the Southeast. Again, these

We have learned that bucks will readily enter the dense grass in daylight and scope the plots from there. A lot of hunters on these sites have reported seeing bucks standing in dense patches of native grass as if they think they are invisible.

are examples from my area, and the species will differ in other regions. Talk with a local wildlife biologist or get a copy of a regional field guide to native plants to learn the desirable species where you hunt.

Whether you are starting perennial native forbs from seed or in live plug or tubeling form, they may need some protection in order to get established. Perennials are usually a little slower to get started and are therefore more vulnerable to over browsing. This can be done pretty easily by planting them in narrow strips and staking a roll of wire or plastic mesh over the strip a foot or so off the ground. You can do this in spots and move the screen around a couple of times until you get a decent stand. The first year is the only time you should have to do this as the plants will be coming from mature rootstock the second year and will stand much more browsing.

Soft-mast trees and shrubs

Bareroot native trees and shrubs are an excellent addition of native plants and eventual seasonal mast in food plots. They can be used both to broaden the foods available around your food plots and, in the case of shrubs, to deepen the transitional edge between mature forest and open food plots. Remember we're talking about food plots, and just like it isn't our garden, neither is it our orchard so the main thing is to get plenty of them started, and pretty doesn't count.

Some native fruit-producing trees deer prefer in the Southeast are persimmon, crabapple, and pear. Some shrubs include plum, blackberry and blueberry. There are many other native woody plants that offer browse, mast and cover that deer are high-

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ly attracted to such as beautyberry, sweetspires and even greenbriar. Your region, soil properties and available sunlight will dictate which species will work.

Native Grasses

While the deer on your property are browsing a variety of native plants, and eating fruit from others, they use some mainly for cover. Deer consistently use native warm-season grasses (NWSG), when available, for travel corridors and bedding. We began noticing this on a client's 2,000-acre property in Georgia. It was an old row-crop farm with very little in the way of dense cover. There were good deer numbers in the area around this farm, but the only time they passed through this place was at night. Over a period of five years we established NWSG and were amazed at the results. The manager reported that deer were using the stands for cover and movement to such an extent that the number of daytime buck sightings had gone through the roof.

This experience fueled a lot of energy and optimism about strategic native cover placement. Our next move was to try using NWSG around food plots, and even to



QDMA member Ken Kozminski of Michigan looks at dense cover and desirable forage that resulted from allowing native plants to regenerate from the seedbank. While the species vary from region to region, every deer hunter can learn the valuable native plant species where they hunt, and how to encourage them.

plant belts of NWSG across the middle of open food plots to break them up, and things began to get very interesting. We found that bucks seemed to have a false sense of security when they were able to follow a band of native grass. Our Georgia client shared his experience with a friend in Mississippi, who planted some of his own. While he was out there hunting, my client called to tell me how he had watched a nice buck follow a strip of switchgrass all the way out into the middle of a large food

plot. We now make NWSG strips a part of every food plot.

We create these strips either by planting bareroot switchgrass or by drilling seed. When using bareroot plants, we stagger the plants about three to four plants wide, with 2 to 3 feet between plants, making the strips from 6 to 9 feet wide. The main thing is to make a continuous screen. We use bareroot plants to form strips completely across plots, "spurs" coming off a screened area into a plot, and "hallways"

with plants on both sides. When using a seed drill, these features are single-pass strips as wide as the drill: 5.5 feet.

As we all know, mature bucks often “stage” in secure locations near food plots, just out of sight, and either wait until dark to enter the plot or scope it out from a distance without ever entering. Another practice we have employed is screening off some of these staging areas with dense plantings of switchgrass along food plot edges.

On the inside edge of the rim of switchgrass we plant a lower-growing native grass like indiagrass or bluestem, with strips of switchgrass leading across the plot. Our intent is to give the buck the sense that he is still hidden as he enters the lower-growing grass and then to encourage movement out into the plot with the strips. A lot of our hunters have seen bucks standing in a dense patch of native grass as if they think they are invisible. I have killed a couple of nice bucks that seemed to have this misconception.

After the grasses have been in place for awhile, deer will use them more and more. Native grasses are tough, and if you run over them while planting annuals it’s no big deal. You can even run the disk right through them after they’re mature and they’ll come right back.

Establishing NWSG is an entire article, or series of articles, and *Quality Whitetails* has covered this topic separately in the past, but I’ll share a few brief tips here. The first critical step is getting rid of any non-native invasive grasses that are on the site already. After that, if you plan to start native warm-season grasses from seed, the trick is to plant them right. Get your soil tilled and rolled firm, and then drill the seed in ¼-inch in clay-based soils and up to ¾-inch in coarse sand. Switchgrass is a slick seed and can be planted with a conventional seed drill, but indiagrass and bluestem seed is fluffy, and the best method is to use a native seed drill that is designed to deliver the bulky seed to the soil at a consistent depth.

Since most people don’t have access to a native seed drill, I am often asked whether this seed can be broadcast. The answer in short is yes, but the fluffy seed does not spread well at all as it catches air, kind of like throwing an empty paper cup. Adding a granular amendment like cat litter helps a little bit. If you are planting narrow strips in a food plot, where neither swath width

nor consistency is so critical, you really can get away with it. If you choose to try this method, it is very important you roll the soil firm after tilling and before broadcasting and then make sure the seed is not covered up too deeply by dragging it in rather than disking. Then follow up with another rolling. This can be adjusted based on soil type in order to achieve the final planted depth described above. However, before you broadcast, check with your local USDA NRCS office or county extension agent, who may be able to connect you with a program that lends or

rents native grass drills for planting.

In addition to seeding NWSG cover strips I also use live plants. Bareroot switchgrass establishes easily when planted in the dormant season and offers good cover the first year. These bunchgrasses will get larger every year with some topping out well over 6 feet tall, 4 feet wide and 16 inches across the base.

Placement Strategy

I’ve covered the options for native plants — including forbs, shrubs, trees and

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grasses — so now let's look at arrangement. A good way to begin this process is to take the time to sit in each stand you have near a food plot. Think about your hunting experiences and how, when and where deer entered and reacted to each plot. Now think about how you can enhance the plot to encourage travel from different directions or into the plot itself, as well as offering deer more security as they approach and enter the plot. Also, think about where you may be able to use NWSG for vertical structure while keeping your own view obstruction to a minimum. You also need to account for multiple stand sites to allow for hunting in different wind conditions.


While you are considering strategic placement, also consider shade-tolerance and moisture requirements of the natives you decide on and try to match them with areas in your plot that make the most sense. Choose areas that will be easy to protect from your other activities so someone doesn't accidentally mow, spray or disk plants you are trying to encourage, or disk the roots of growing fruit trees. Use flags or stakes to help protect hard-to-see things from being run over.

PLANT THIS, NOT THAT

There are still many **non-native invasive** plant species that are recommended to landowners and wildlife managers for habitat improvement. QDMA recommends deer managers avoid these risky plants by using any of numerous *native* plant alternatives that offer the same or more benefits. To help you identify the plants to avoid, and the natives to use instead, QDMA's Matt Ross, a wildlife biologist and licensed forester, assembled an extensive list titled "Plant This, Not That." You'll find Matt's list in the *Habitat Improvement* area of **QDMA.com**.

There's no limit to the designs that work. Edges and corners are obvious places to start, and larger plots can be broken up with any number of belts or bands in ways that make sense in each case. "Islands" of cover and native forage can even be considered. However, no matter what design you choose, be sure to leave room for practical food plot maintenance with tractors or other large equipment. Balance the objective of security cover and diverse forage for deer with the objective of wise food

plot management in the open plot.

I hope I have challenged you to look at food plots in a new way and shed some new light on the use of native plants. This process is not so much more expensive or time consuming, especially after the first year, but it does require you to think outside the box. It can be hard to change the system you are used to, but the pay-off is worth it. These are the plants that formed American wildlife habitat long before we came on the scene, and, if only by virtue of their sustainability, have certainly earned a place in our food plots. 

About the Author: Joe Reams is a habitat consultant and native seed and plant producer in Greenville, Fla. In 2006 he and his wife Kathy founded Southern Habitats LLC, a habitat restoration contracting firm, and have since completed numerous technical wildlife habitat and native groundcover restoration projects for state wildlife and water conservation agencies as well as private landowners. Joe enjoys shaping hunting properties with native plants. He and Kathy have three daughters, Kelsi, Chloe and Abby. Learn more at their website: www.southernhabitats.com.