

A Recipe for Successful Food Plots in Michigan

By Michael Veine

I've been tinkering with food plots for more than a decade and have learned what works and what doesn't in "my neck of the woods." I own hunting land containing food plots in two distinctly different areas. One location is in southern Michigan's farm country, and the other parcel is in the Big Woods country of Michigan's Upper Peninsula (U.P.). In the past five years alone, I've managed to take my legal limit of 10 adult bucks hunting the food plots on my properties. Here's my recipe for successful food plots.

SOUTHERN MICHIGAN (MIXED FARMLAND AND DEVELOPED AREAS)

I live on 38 acres in southern Michigan. The property was once used for agriculture, but not for the last 30 years. The high ground was farmed intensively and the wetlands were even used for cattle pastures. Over the past few decades, the land has grown back with lots of brush along with cattails, flooded and upland hardwoods (maple, oak and cherry) and softwoods (pines, cedar and tamarack). My property is currently bordered by active farmlands on one side, a large swamp on the back, and lots of small parcels along the remainder. In fact, I have more than a dozen neighbors that border me, and that number seems to be growing every year as properties are split and developed. Deer hunting pressure is extremely intense. In fact, deer hunters outnumber the deer during modern gun season.

My food plots, stands and access routes are all laid out so that my property serves primarily as a sanctuary to attract deer from the highly pressured surrounding area. Since the land is mostly wetlands with thick, heavy cover, it works out great. My food plots were installed on high spots where access will not likely bump deer from the sanctuary areas. Because the neighboring agricultural crops are rotated between corn, winter wheat and alfalfa, my food plots had to have an edge to up my odds for success. Also, I did not

have much tillable land to work with, so I had to maximize my food plot strategy as well. Because my property dries up every year during the summer and early fall, I rented a mini-excavator and dug several water-holes along the edge of thick cover near bedding areas. I then installed my food plots near the water holes. By giving deer a bedding sanctuary, steady water supplies and food sources all located within protective cover, the deer typically stay on my land during daylight hours and then venture onto the neighboring fields under the cover of darkness.

Due to a seasonal stream that runs through the front of my property, the plots are very hard to access with large equipment; so all the work was done with hand-held equipment. I put in my food plots by cutting small openings about 1/4 acre in size using a chain saw and brush cutter. I chose brushy areas consisting mainly of various hardwood saplings. I cut the brush off as close to the ground as possible and just mowed regularly for two years to allow the small stumps to rot down and build up the sandy soil with humus. At the end of the second year, I sprayed the plots with a non-selective herbicide and obtained a few soil samples. The pH was slightly acidic, so I limed the plots by shaking bags of lime across the ground by hand. The next spring I sprayed the plots again with a herbicide using a backpack sprayer. After a couple weeks, I fertilized the "browned-down" plots with low nitrogen fertilizer and then tilled using a garden tiller.

I've experimented with all kinds of different seeds on



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those plots and now only use Imperial Whitetail Clover for all my food plot needs.

Because I don't have much room to work with, all of my southern Michigan food plots are of the small "kill plot" variety. I have stands hung right over them and doctor them up to attract bucks by installing rubbing trees and licking branches at strategic spots. I also

funnel deer to and from the plots by manipulating the habitat. I maintain my plots with two or three mowings per year along with spring and late summer applications of fertilizer. I also use selective herbicides every other year to halt weed and grass invasion. Because the plots are small, I even weed them by hand at times.

UPPER PENINSULA PROPERTY (BIG WOODS)

My U.P. property consists of 160 acres of mixed hardwoods (maple and aspen) and softwoods (cedar, balsam and pine). A stream runs the length of the property. The entire watercourse is laced with beaver ponds and is quite marshy and brush-filled. The rest of the property is a 50/50 mix of cedar swamp and low ridges. Hunting pressure is relatively low in the area, which is composed entirely of large private parcels managed mostly for deer hunting and timber production. There isn't any agriculture in the area so it is pure "big woods" deer hunting, which I truly love.

Half of my property received aggressive timber treatments in 1996 and 1997, with a 40-acre clear-cut being the most noticeable result. Another 40 was selective-cut, and most of the back 80, which is comprised of a big cedar swamp, has not been timbered much in more than 100 years. I plan to leave it mostly alone as winter cover. When we bought it, access on the property was restricted to foot travel only. As a result of the logging and road and food plot projects, we now have roads and trails throughout the parcel.

In 1998, we broke ground with our first food plots. I hired an excavator to doze out two decent-size plots and also carve out some roads, trails and small openings. One plot is about three acres and was created on a stump-filled maple ridge in the center of an aspen clear-cut. Another plot was carved out of an old burn and is surrounded by thick balsam, maple and cedar cover. When the excavator originally cleared the plots, he did a good job of plowing up the soil. I did not apply any herbicides to those plots before the original plant-

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ing. The pH was very acidic everywhere on the property, so we had to add tons of lime. By hand, we cleared away most of the rocks, sticks and other debris and then pulled a drag behind a big lawn tractor to level the fields and to help mix the lime and fertilizer into the soil.

I've planted a variety of seed brands into the plots as a test to see what would work the best. My results were very mixed, but the Imperial Whitetail Clover I tested performed the best with the highest germination rate of any seeds that I tested. The Imperial Clover also stood up to the heavy grazing better than anything else. I soon replanted every bit of ground available with Imperial Whitetail Clover, including strategic stretches of roadways and more food plots that I added later.

I eventually bought an ATV along with a heavy-duty disk, a boom sprayer and a large-capacity, pull-behind spreader. That equipment investment has paid big dividends in the quality of my food plots. I am convinced that spraying selective herbicides like Slay and Arrest is the key to keeping Imperial Clover thick and lush with minimal effort over the long haul. Now, I simply spray my food plots with selective herbicides when needed, and the longevity of my food plots has more than doubled. The ATV and equipment makes maintaining the plots a snap. I still do my mowing with an old lawn tractor. Used lawn tractors can be found cheap and they work great for mowing plots, roads and trails.

In the spring of 2005, I limed and replanted a plot with Imperial Whitetail Clover, and it germinated well, but we had one of the worst droughts I can remember. When I checked things out in late summer, the clover was brown and dried-up. I thought it was dead and I'd lost my entire planting. However, in September, the rains finally came, and that clover surprised me by greening up like magic. In just a couple of weeks, it sprouted up thick and lush. During the October bow season, my plots were hammered as dozens of whitetails were drawn to the succulent food source. I nailed two nice bucks near that plot. Never give up on Imperial Whitetail Clover.

My hunting strategy on my U.P. property does not involve hunting directly over the food plots. I treat them like part of a sanctuary by hunting no closer than 100 yards. I've created funnels between the bedding areas and the food sources, and that's where I set up my ambushes.

The deer on my land hit my food plots hard, and I plan to expand two of the food plots, adding another eight acres of high-quality forage with Imperial Whitetail Clover. I'll take it one step at a time.



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