

DEER DESSERTS...

The Soft Mast Equation

By **Jim Casada**

Photos by the Author

With the noteworthy exception of the rut, deer are largely what they eat. That is, there's no better means to come to grips with whitetails — from a fat, old long-nosed doe to the buck of your dreams — than through understanding their food preferences and using them in your hunting strategies.

Generally, hunters understand that. Visit any local sporting goods store or crossroads hangout before the season, and you will hear talk about what the mast crop looks like. Similarly, dedicated whitetail enthusi-

asts wisely spend considerable time, effort and often money in preparing food plots and plantings to attract and nurture deer.

Yet for reasons I have never quite understood, one aspect of deer diet and the way hunters can use it is consistently overlooked. That's the food commonly called soft mast, although terms such as deer candy and whitetail sweets are also used. Just as most humans have a hankering for a scrumptious piece of homemade cake or a deep-dish berry cobbler, deer also like sweets in their diet. That food preference might be described as the soft-mast equation, and hunters who determine the solution to the equation through knowledge of nature and whereabouts of critical soft mast gain a meaningful edge.

Here's a closer look at major soft-mast items, where to find them and how to use them to your advantage.

MUSCADINES, SCUPPERNONGS AND OTHER WILD GRAPES

Through much of the whitetail's range — from Virginia and the Carolinas to Texas and the Midwest — wild grapes grow in abundance. Regionally, they go by various names, but the most widespread variety is probably the muscadine. It has been domesticated and is prized for use in jams, jellies and wine, as well as eating enjoyment straight from the vines. Scuppernongs are one type of muscadine, but there are also fox

grapes, possum grapes and more. Without exception, deer love them. Whether the grapes are in hedgerows, along ditch banks, in arbors near old homesteads or on massive vines climbing high into mature hardwoods, deer will dine on them when grapes ripen in early fall.

The approach for savvy hunters is obvious. Find grapes, make mental notes on their location, do some pre-season scouting to see if they are bearing fruit, and plan to be on a stand in the area when grapes ripen. Most often, this occurs during archery season, although some grapes cling to vines until frost and do not begin to build the sugar content deer love until the weather turns chilly.

PERSIMMONS

If you have enjoyed persimmon pudding, nothing more needs to be said about the fruit's appeal to deer. A properly made persimmon pudding is nectar of the gods, or as my grandfather used to say, "good enough to bring tears of pure joy to the eyes of a country boy." Conversely, the taste of an unripe persimmon immediately redefines pucker power, as many city boys have learned the hard way from country cousins. When ripened to the utmost of sticky sweetness, though, these orange globes of goodness attract deer like a magnet. Of course, persimmons also attract foxes, raccoons, possums and bears, but rest assured, whitetails near persimmon trees know all about them.

Persimmons bear fruit when quite young, and unlike oaks, for example, they seldom fail to set a crop because of a late-spring freeze. However, you need to know persimmon trees come in male and female varieties, and a male persimmon will never bear fruit. Fortunately, the fruits, which sometimes get almost as large as a ping-pong ball, are easily spotted in late summer and early fall. It's a myth to suggest persimmons do not ripen until after the first hard frost. Ripening time usually coincides closely with the arrival of cold weather.

After persimmons begin to drop from the trees, whitetails will visit them regularly to check out the dessert buffet. I've even seen deer bump and brush against trees to knock fruit to the ground. Incidentally, you might want to try something similar: giving a tree — provided it isn't too big — a good shake before climbing into a nearby stand. Another aspect of persimmons worth remembering is that their fruit doesn't fall at once. In fact, wrinkled persimmons — so sweet that sugar seems bland by comparison — will sometimes cling to trees long after the last leaf has fallen and deer season is advanced.

Persimmons are widespread trees that do well in overgrown fields, along pasture edges and fence rows, or anywhere other than mature woods, where a seed from deer or other animal droppings lands and takes root. You should factor them into your hunting equation. To me, persimmons rank No. 1 in the world of soft mast.



Muscadines are a favored type of soft mast in the early fall, from Virginia and the Carolinas to Texas and the Midwest.

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paws must be the most overlooked. I remember the catchy lines of an old folk song: "Picking up pawpaws putting 'em in the basket, way down yonder in the pawpaw patch." American history buffs might also know that pawpaw custard was George Washington's favorite dessert. It ranks high among desserts for whitetails, too.

Widespread but probably overlooked by 90 percent of deer hunters, pawpaws bloom early with a distinctive purple flower. Perhaps every other spring, they fall victim to frosts. When pawpaws "make," though, the oblong fruits — faintly reminiscent of bananas — are a great delicacy for deer. On a small property I own, I have a permanent stand overlooking a patch of pawpaws that covers perhaps two acres. During years when they bear fruit, it's a great place to be in late September and early October.

CRABAPPLES

Because they stand out as a visual delight when in bloom, crabapples are easy to locate for deer hunters who also chase turkeys in spring. The crabapple's small, acidic fruit doesn't particularly appeal to humans, although with some sugar, it makes a marvelous jelly. That's not the case with deer, and they will dine on crabapples with delight. In fact, I've noticed that when hunting commercial apple orchards where occasional crabapples are planted as pollinators, deer like them as well as domestic fruits.

DOMESTIC FRUITS

These enter into the soft-mast equation in several ways. That's particularly true with pears and apples. Large orchards in whitetail country are an obvious focus, but that's not the only place you will find domestic fruits. It's common to find pear or apple trees in the middle of pastures, and even more commonly near long-abandoned farms and old homesteads. Also, in parts of the country, you can find apples growing wild in wide areas.

No matter the origin of apple and pear trees, deer love them. I have both in my back yard, and one of the joys of eating my breakfast in early fall is watching whitetails do the same — enjoying fruit for breakfast. (I have enough cooking pears and apples that I can spare some). Beyond that, a stand near fruit trees or on travel routes leading to them offers promise as fruits ripen in autumn.



Sticky sweet persimmons appeal to a deer's sweet-tooth.

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