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White-tailed Deer Nutrition: Spring and Summer Food Crops

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In previous issues of *Wildlife Trends* we have emphasized the importance of nutrition to quality deer management. We have stressed the point that, in many areas of the South, natural forage falls short in providing whitetails their minimum energy and protein needs. Although we have suggested using raw, whole soybeans in free-choice feeders as an effective means of supplementing our inadequate natural forage, cultivated food plots continue to remain very important.

While many hunters and landowners plant high-quality winter foods to supplement the diets of their deer, many of these same people often ignore the nutritional needs of deer during the late winter, spring and summer months. Generally, late winter and late summer are periods of stress when fewer nutrients are available for southern deer. As a consequence, this "off-season" period is a time of special needs. This is the time of antler growth for the bucks, and for the does, the time of gestation, fawning and lactation. This crucial time in the annual rhythm of the white-tail should not be overlooked or ignored if quality deer management is the objective.

While late winter, spring, summer and early fall are times of special nutritional needs for southern deer, it is also a time filled with pitfalls. Pitfalls that lead to potential failure for those of us growing food crops for deer and other wildlife. Keeping in mind that late

freezes, droughts, diseases, insect pests, and especially competition from weeds and grasses make it very difficult to produce good warm-season crops for deer, I offer the following suggestions for some of my favorites.

Soybeans

There is probably no better warm-season forage to plant for deer than soybeans. Soybean foliage or leaves are high in protein, and the soybean seed is extremely high in protein and in digestible energy. Soybean plants are

browsed heavily by deer from sprouting through seed production. And herein lies the problem with this premium warm-season forage. In many areas deer populations are so high that soybean plants are often killed by very early overgrazing. Unless deer density in the area to be planted is low to moderate, large plots (of 5 to 10 acres) may be necessary, and they may need to be protected with temporary high-voltage electric fencing to allow the crop to become established.

There are many varieties of soybeans to choose from, but it is best to select a late-maturing variety or a variety bred for forage production. You would do well to consult with your local county extension agent or with forage specialists at land-grant universities for information on varieties for your area.

Planting dates vary from late April to mid-June, depending on the bean variety and planting location. Soil tests should be conducted to determine lime and fertilization rates. Generally speaking, soybeans should be fertilized with 200 to 300 pounds per acre of 0-20-20 fertilizer. Note that there is no nitrogen in this fertilizer. Since the soybean is a legume, fixing its own nitrogen, supplying nitrogen to competing weeds and grasses can

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