

## Deer Management – It's Not What You Plant, It's What You Cut

There are many different wildlife management practices that have been promoted over the years. The goal of most of these practices is to improve the habitat. So deer management is really more about land management than it is about actual deer management. Of course certain practices such as a controlled harvest could be considered deer management but really this is people (hunter) management. So unlike livestock management which involves fencing, cross breeding, vaccinations, feeding program, etc., we actually do very little deer management as such. However, the management we conduct on the ground to improve the deer habitat can have a very significant impact on the number and quality of deer that land will support.

One of the first thoughts that may run through our mind when we talk about management is planting food plots, but this is just a drop in the bucket compared to other more beneficial practices. To increase the number, health or size of a deer on a given tract of land involves providing the basic habitat needs of food, water, and shelter (or cover). Water is almost never a limiting factor when it comes to deer. Even though deer do need water daily and prefer to drink from an open water source such as a stream or pond, they are mobile animals and can usually find the water they need even during drought years. When it comes to shelter, deer have lived for centuries with nothing more than a thicket to knock the wind off, even in areas of the country with much more harsh winters than we find here in Alabama. The primary need for cover is simply a place to hide and rest during the day. I have seen some farms where this could be a limiting factor but again deer are very mobile and will usually find a place to hide if there are any woodlands, thickets or even tall grass nearby.

So that brings us to food and this is the big one. Some land managers have opted to provide food directly such as placing corn, soybeans or commercial deer feeds in a feeding bunk. While this does provide some nutrition it comes at a cost. First of all, in Alabama if you hunt anywhere near one of these feeding stations during the hunting season it may cost you a fine. If you feed during the other parts of the year, the cost adds up in buying the feed which gets more expensive every year. Feeding also unnaturally concentrates deer feeding in one spot and that can lead to the transmission of diseases. So I am not a fan of deer feeding, however if you must, it would be best to feed in late winter (after deer season) or early spring when food is scarce and bucks are growing new antlers. Also be sure to move the feeding station often and use a bunk to keep the feed off the ground as much as possible.

Since deer are browsing animals, a far better method of providing food is to go to work on the habitat. And this often means cutting trees. Why? Because the main thing that controls the growth of browse is sunlight, soil fertility and rain. Let's look at each one of these. There is very little we can do to affect the rainfall so let's skip this one. Soil fertility can be changed but usually at a significant cost and must be repeated frequently such as liming and fertilization. So that leaves sunlight. We can increase browse by reducing shade, in other word cutting trees. This can be done as a clear cut or a thinning. Keep in mind that a clearcut does not have to be a large area. Small patch cuts can be very beneficial especially if done where there is already some natural browse such as honeysuckle, greenbrier, and other low growing plants.

Thinning pine stands is a great way to improve browse especially if followed by prescribed burn to remove the pine straw litter. This allows sunlight to reach the ground and encourage low growing plants. Even hardwood stand can be thinned but you must approach this with more care. Thin hardwoods too much and you may encourage "epicormic sprouting" or new shoots developing up and down the main trunk of the remaining hardwoods. This rapidly deteriorates the value of the trees from a lumber standpoint. However, selective thinning can be done to removed trees with low wildlife benefit such as sweetgum and provide more room for oaks, persimmons, dogwoods and trees that are more beneficial.

Hardwoods can also be prescribed burned but again this takes much more care than in pines or the result will be killed hardwood trees or scared trees with little commercial value.

So the bottom line is that a lot of deer management is all about providing food. And while planting winter and summer food plots or even deer feeding can be used toward this goal, these methods are not the most cost effective or beneficial practices. It is more about providing browse by exposing more of the forest floor to sunlight. So it's not so much about what you plant, it's more about what you cut.