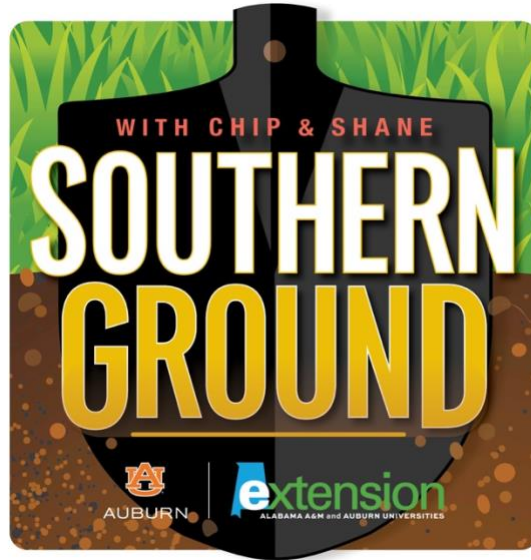




## Season 1 Episode 19—Planting Deer Food Plots

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Announcer

Welcome to the *Southern Ground* podcast provided by Alabama Extension through Auburn University. Extension educators Shane Harris and Dr. Chip East discuss seasonal lawn and garden topics, address common questions, and provide the practical solutions you want to know. Let's dig in to our southern ground.

Shane Harris

Hello everyone, and welcome to *Southern Ground*. I'm Shane Harris with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and across from me is Dr. Chip East, also a fellow horticulturist. Hello, Chip.

Chip East

Hey Shane, good to be with you today for another episode of *Southern Ground*.

Shane Harris

Chip, what we got on the table today?

Chip East

I'm excited about this episode today because we're talking about wildlife plantings, and we've got Kyle Marable with us.

Kyle Marable

Alex City

Chip East

He is from the Alabama Cooperative Extension system. And he's local here in Alex City, not far from where we're recording today.

Shane Harris

Good to see you, Kyle.

Kyle Marable

Good to see y'all, thank y'all for having me here.

Shane Harris

We're going to talk about a topic that's sort of popular, especially for the hunters, those outdoor enthusiasts that want to begin to track that big deer, that big buck, and that's planting the green field. That seems to be, an always a southern, at least here in Alabama, southern tradition. We've got to plant, the green field. And we want to talk about, not only that process, but in this case, how to be successful, because everybody wants that big buck Chip, to come on the green field while we're doing the hunting season. And so that field has got to be planted correctly.

Chip East

Hey, we're not there wasting time Kyle, we're there to get that big deer. So when we talk to you today we want to guarantee that we're going to, we're going to have some good meat coming off into our freezer this winter just because of this episode today. Right?

Kyle Marable

Not making any guarantees. We can talk about it, but we can't make the deer show up.

Shane Harris

Let's start with why and what is a greenfield. So talk about that supplemental feeding that we see, being done in the fall.

Kyle Marable

All right, it's important to think about when you're thinking about a greenfield, you want to think about why are you doing that greenfield or food plot, whatever you want to call it. Because, if you're doing it for nutrition, are you doing it for hunting, recreation. What's your purpose? What's your reasoning for that exact greenfield or your greenfield plan? Because that's going to affect why you do it. It's going to affect where you do it. It's going to affect how much you put in food plot, may even affect whether or not you want a food plot or not. So, looking at your overall management objectives and then also looking at what's your objectives with that food plot? Because a food plot is not going to be wildlife habitat. Wildlife habitat is going to be, you know, the natural stuff, it's going to be the plants is going to be kind of working on that environmental element of it. The food plot part of it is going to be something in addition to that. So, in most cases, it's going to be important to focus on that habitat creation first and then move on to the food plots.

With that said, certain situations like maybe leased land, small acreage, recreational use may have it to where your primary goal or just, you know, doing a food plot is more of a priority than your other management. But it's going to be a case-by-case scenario. And it's something that, talking it over with an extension agent like me or another wildlife biologist could be a good idea if you have questions about that sort of thing.

Shane Harris

From a hunter's standpoint, traditionally it's always been as an attractant. We're trying to attract the deer to an area that we're hunting on a piece of property. We're trying to bring those deer in closer, so that we can see them. So it would be compared to putting a bird feeder out in the backyard. We're trying to bring them into a particular area.

Kyle Marable

Yes, I agree, and that is probably what we're going to focus on today. But just kind of when you're thinking about it overall, before you even put a disc in the ground or seed in the ground or whatever. Just, making sure you have the right approach to why you're doing it. And knowing in this case that we're talking about the hunting aspect of it. We want to attract, probably going to talk about deer today, I think, but why, what's your purpose in trying to get that hunter side of it. And so we'll talk about that mostly, but the other sides come into effect as well. If that's something that is maybe more of an interest to our nonhunter's or somebody who's maybe they are a hunter, but they are less interested hunting over a feedlot.

Chip East

So, Kyle if we're interested in deer only but we could be planting food plots for other animals, but today we're just going to talk about deer only. How far would a deer travel to get to a well-managed food plot?

Kyle Marable

That's going to depend a lot on, I don't have a solid answer for you. I think it's going to depend a lot on what's between that deer and that food plot. Do you have a lot of well managed habitat between wherever the deer is located to that food plot? Do you have other food plots available? What time of the season it is. So what other aspects are driving that movement? So it's hard to say for sure. I'm not confident giving you a good answer on that one.

Chip East

So, thinking about the food plot, the size of the food plot, and then is it better to have two food plots that are acre in size, or five food plots that are a 10th or 20 food plots or smaller ones or larger ones? What's the goal? How far apart should one be from another?

Kyle Marable

This goes back to kind of the factor of when you are talking about your overall management goals. How much acreage do you have? You don't really want to put too much of your acreage, so over 10% would probably be too much of your property. Especially for, decent size, several hundred acres plus properties would probably be too much in food plot. We look at it and say, who all is using it? How many people are going to be hunting this property? How many hunters am I trying to accommodate? So, if you have a small to medium sized property, and you are trying to accommodate multiple hunters, and your primary focus of method of hunting is over a feed plot. Then you probably want to have smaller food plots that are spread out, so that you can get access to those at the same time. On the other side of that is you don't want them too small. You can do a smaller food

plot if that's what you have available for bow hunting or keeping your shots close by, or just don't have a whole lot of space overall.

But when you think about size, you want to think about being able to get sunlight on the ground. So, if you're trying to fit a food plot in a forested area and it's constantly shaded, it's not big enough to get sunlight on the ground, you probably need to go a little bit bigger.

Shane Harris

Does shape matter when you're designing this green field or food plot? We see lots of different variations and sometimes the land or the open spot may dictate that shape, but is there an ideal textbook shape? Or they don't care what shape it is.

Kyle Marable

I think the only time that shape is going to become a really important factor is if you get a really big food plot. If the deer are having to walk several hundred yards across an open food plot to get from one place to the other, they may be less likely to use that center part.

Square is usually easy to plant so that's perfectly fine. But you can also get as whatever the landscape dictates, as long as you're getting enough sunlight in the ground, for it to grow, and you're not creating too big of a space for them to not want to cross an area. If you have something like that, you can make some landscape adjustments and provide some cover in different ways. I would say look at your surrounding. Are you putting the plot in next to a field? Are you putting it next to some trees? Open forest, closed forest kind of deal, and kind of make adjustments as to how far they are going. Also, if you're starting out with a new food plot, you can always make it bigger. Or, if you've got one and you put it in and it's like, okay, that's too big, you can always plant less next year. So, you can kind of adapt.

Shane Harris

Chip as hunter's, we always try to find the ideal spot to hunt. And a lot of times those green fields are already been planted, they're already in a particular location. But a lot of people like those bottomland sometimes they like a up on the ridge. Does location matter in this case?

Chip East

That was going to be my question for Kyle. If I have an open spot and I'm not cutting any trees, it's just an open spot on top of the hill. And I've got an open spot next to a stream in a lower area. I think about the lower area, maybe if you're in a drought when you're trying to plant them, I might have more moisture in the ground. But as far as the deer is concerned, does it matter if I'm on a hill or a lower area?

Kyle Marable

Probably not. Overall it may for that individual property. So this is going to go back to looking at your property. Especially if you've owned your property, if you have hunted your property a good bit, then you probably have a decent idea of how they move normally so you can make some adjustments according to that? But if you're new to the property, or if you're just trying to say, you know, where's a good spot? I'd look at what's around it. So what other habitat, like I discussed, what other habitat types, what other habitat needs are being met with the surrounding area. And then potentially decide what you want to plant, how big you want to plant it, and what you want to plant based off of that.

Chip East

So, if I had a good cover, brushy type growth all the way around a spot, that would be a good food plot. But if it was thinned trees and it had been burned recently, I don't know, and you can see a hundred yards through there, that might not be a good place?

Kyle Marable

I would say more along the lines of, let's say you have a five year, you know, you're looking at and you get a really young, dense, pine loblolly stand. Not much happening in that right now. Probably passed through it, but not much else happening. But you've got an area open fire managed, you know pine stand kind of like what you are talking about. I'd be more apt to put the food plot near that open, well managed stand, than I would be near that dense one. Because they're already probably over there using that open forest, that well managed, or even like a cut over or something. They're already probably using that. Having it in that area gives them a reason to be like, you know, hey, we're over here doing what we're supposed to be doing, let's swing by and check out that food plot. versus if it's over there by itself, in the middle of 200 acres of ten year old loblolly pine, there's not a whole lot of reason for that deer to be over there, other than your food plot. Now, like I said, especially if you lease, if you're doing multiple management, there's a lot of reasons that we own land and a lot of reasons we use land. If that's what you got, then we can work with that. But if you have the choice, trying to put it, maybe between kind of where it's bridging that gap between that dense, unmanaged or poorly managed section or versus the good.

Shane Harris

What you're saying there's to look at the layout of the land, how the deer would naturally move from one area to the other. If they're going from cover and bedding areas to a natural feeding area, back and forth is put it in the middle or nearby a normal pattern of movement.

Kyle Marable

Yes, trying to work along that normal movement, trying to see what other reasons they have to be in that area. Because if they don't have a whole lot of reason to be somewhere, then one, they may be less likely to find your food plot. But if they do, they're also being exposed to more predators, or they're being exposed to just more energy use trying to get from one the elements and whatever else just to get from wherever they're bedding, wherever they normally living over to your food plot and back. So trying to reduce that need to go long distances.

Chip East

Kyle, so we've decided where we're going to put our food plot. We've decided how large it is, that sort of thing, what are the steps we have to take before we actually plant the plot.

Kyle Marable

And this is going to be probably the most important part of our discussion. Outside of why are you planning it? Making sure you do plan it correctly is going to be the most important part. And so the first thing you want to do is do a soil test. Y'all have probably discussed soil test on this podcast before, but if you're doing food plots, make sure, depending on how big that, food plots going to be, make sure you get some samples from, random samples from across your food plot.

Make sure you get a good sample size for that. Ideally, you want to take a sample from each individual food plot. That's not necessarily what everybody always does, but ideally that's what you should be doing. And so, you do that soil test. And when you do that, you say, hey, we have a tendency just to put like food plot or green field or something when you submit it to the soil test. Actually tell them what you're planning to plant, so whatever you're actually planning to plant or wanting to plant, put that down as the crop, because that way they can tweak it even more if they need to. Now, with that in mind, keep in mind, if you're going to put something like a clover or some kind of other nitrogen fixer, they may end up recommending less nitrogen. So, you may or may not want to include that initially in the mix. But if you're going to do something like wheat or oats, or something like that and just put that in there, other than just food plot.

So you want to do that food plot, do that soil test first. And then once you get that results back, that's where you can really start kind of hammering out how to do. The lime, is going to be the most important part of this process. You know, we have most of the state of Alabama, we're going to have really acidic soils. So, we're going to probably need, in most cases, 1 to 2 tons per acre. Look at your soil test, go off of that, not just some random person off the podcast here. But that's typically what it's going to be. So once you've done that, ideally you'd want to, at least six months before you're going to plant. How often do we think about that deer food plot six months before we're going to plant them? Rarely, so if you have to lime right before you plant, it's better than nothing. But ideally, six months at least before you do it so it has time to activate and get integrated into the soil.

Shane Harris

And we've talked about taking sort test on a previous episode, Chip. Our earlier episode for the year was, "It Starts with the Soil" and we get deep into fertility, pH and taking a soil test. What you are describing here Kyle is changing the pH, raising the pH for most of our acidic soil so that it's ideal. So Chip, let's talk a little bit about getting that pH correct and the ideal range for a greenfield or food plot.

Chip East

What Kyle's describing is the same thing we would do if we were planting a garden. Same exact soil test. We gather our samples, we write down on the, there's a paper that comes with it, crop to be grown, and we're going to write and you'll talk about it later, whether it be wheat or oats. Or it could be a corn, if in the summertime, I don't know, whatever we're planting. The soil lab will send a report back of how to fertilize that specific crop. We know the plants need. The soil test just analyzes your soil to see what you've got so we can fertilize the difference. And we recommend that every day of the week. I'm glad you mentioned it here because it's so important. I've heard a deer Kyle, someone having more than one food plot, and the pH right in one food plot and not in another, and he can see it in the animals that come to eat.

Shane Harris

Yeah, and we've talked with hunters. We get this kind of question, put your money and time and effort in the soil test, in the lime, in the pH. Because that's going to dictate anything else that you do when it comes to being successful. Including what fertilizer to use, how much fertilizer to put out, and the success of the crop that you're growing.

Kyle Marable

Exactly. And that's what I was going to get to this in a minute, but we'll go ahead and hit it right here since we're discussing it. Deer or what's called opportunistic browsers. And so they don't go out and just mow down everything in front of them. They have the ability to tell how palatable, how nutritional plants are. So they're

going to go out and they're going to walk through that field or walk through that forest or whatever they're in, and they're going to pick out the ideal foods for that moment. And now what's ideal this week may not be the same as next week, or they may eat all of what's our deal and have to go to secondary. But they're going to pick what's best at that moment in time, when they go through there.

Shane Harris

Go a little deeper because I found that interesting, what you're describing. And we talked to gardener/homeowners where they go out there and they'll eat a bite of this in the bite of that. So how are they analyzing it? How do they know that? Is it just because it is green? Just because it's pretty? Is it based on taste? How do they know that?

Kyle Marable

I am sure that there is some research out there that better answers this question, than me, but I mean, first of all, how palatable is it? If it's something that is fresh and green and new, it's likely going to taste better, be easier to chew, and also likely going to be more nutritional.

I don't know exactly. I'm sure the research is there, but I don't actually know myself exactly how they tell. But they absolutely. We see all of the list of ideal deer plants, tiers of quality of deer plants. And there's some truth to some of those. But also you got to look at, like I said, seasonal.

And you get to look at, you know, what site is it on, kind of like as mentioned here, if it's limed, or what we're going to talk about in just a minute. Fertilized all of that is absorbed by the plant and grows better. So it's going to have better nutrition. And the deer will absolutely, just instinctually know that they can pick and choose. And that's where those different foods, especially, if you're talking about the native stuff, having that seasonal variety, having those options to where okay, this grows does better this time of the year.

This grows and does better this time of the year. So, they can go out there and have a preferred food source at different times. This goes to kind of the food plot side of things as well. We're going to put everything in one plant, one situation and bank on that to do what you want it to do. It may work, it may not work. So that's where some of the pitfalls of food plots.

Shane Harris

It's always based on the availability of other food. We have issues with deer in the landscape. It's a lot of times they're hungry, they're looking for something, like you said they're opportunists. They are looking to browse. But it's always interesting Chip to see that they're drawn to the white oak acorns, or they're going after the mushrooms, or they're eating the green briars, or they're eating your pansies in your landscape.

It's always interesting to know what are they eating, what are they drawn to? And that's always the question the hunters want to know. What to plant? What is that magic plant that I can put out there to guarantee that big bucks going to come out there during the hunting season?

Chip East

We had a couple of camellias in our yard Shane, well we had a lot of camellias in the yard. These two that was planted, and I say they were just planted closer to the fence, closer to the edge of the yard, and that's where the deer's coming from. They would eat those down and I thought, they're going to die. They're just not going to grow. And but they wouldn't eat the other camellia 20ft away, but they would eat these two. Now, what was

special about those two? I don't know. But eventually they did overcome it and the deer don't even come to them anymore. But when they were young, I thought, they're going to die because of these deer.

Shane Harris

I was hoping Kyle would have that magic plant, especially for hunters, that he would guarantee that deer is going to do that. But deer just don't work that way. But they do naturally know or are drawn to where that supplemental feeding or food opportunities are there.

Chip East

So, we don't have a this is the ten point buck plant. And this is the eight point.

Shane Harris

That's what they put on the bag, the ten point buck. This is the big buck mix whatever guaranteed.

Chip East

So we're not going to plant the little buck mix. We always plant the big buck mix.

Kyle Marable

So we'll discuss plant and what the plant here in a minute. But there is at least one more step before we get from liming and soil test and liming to what to plant. What's your question Chip?

Chip East

I'm going back to liming, well, you can buy pelletized lime, you can buy the ground limestone. It's hard to spread that ground limestone. I know people that sprayed it by hand. And you can do that with a shovel, but the bigger the food plant, the harder that is. Sometimes it's hard to get a spreader truck into where these food plots are, and sometimes they won't even come because it's such a small area, we may be stuck spreading by hand. They do make drop spreaders that will spread the ground limestone.

But the pelletized lime is what a lot of hunters would do, because it would go in a some of these cyclone, tractor type spreaders that the farmer is use to, and it's easier to spread. It does cost more money than what we call the ag lime. But what do you see in most hunters apply?

Kyle Marable

Ideally if you can get the ag lime, whether they come spread it for you or you have the capability of spreading it, that is going to be a significantly cheaper option. So if you have a lot of food plots, their accessible, you have that ability to do that. That's probably the route you should take. But like you said, there's a lot of people who can't.

Chip East

So and going back to where we put this food plot on our property, a place where a spreader can get to, has a lot to do with it as well.

Kyle Marable

Yeah, I've talked with a bunch of landowners and people who, like you said, they're just not going to come do it for whatever reason. They can't access it, there's not enough, they deal with bigger acreages with farmers or whatever. So going to the pelletized lime works very well. It's just, talking about that six month, it actually absorbs more quickly. So there's a lot of advantages to it, but it is costly. That's really the biggest issue is just significantly more cost. But if you can get, you know, a small food plot that's hard to get to, it's a great way of doing it.

Chip East

And we're not talking about spreading over thousands of acres, we're just talking about a few.

Kyle Marable

Yeah. Like we're saying that lime, that pelletized lime and those small hard to get areas are a great option. Once you've got the lime, which is absolutely the number one step to a good like if you do nothing else to get a good food plot. Wow. After that, you look at that soil test results and you look at what it recommends for your fertilizer. It's one of those, again, it's one of those things where ideally, you do the math or you get one of us to help you do the math. You apply what it recommends to apply, so you don't waste, you don't put too little out, don't put not enough out on the fertilizer. So that's kind of a case by case, yours is going to be unique to your kind of situation. So we won't go too deep on that. Because like we talked about what the nature of how deer eat and how they're able to, determine plant quality. If you do those two things, if you lime and then you fertilize. You can fertilize at time of planting, kind of right around that same time. But if you do those two things, it's almost doesn't matter what you plant because like you're talking about Chip with they were eating those two camellias and not the others. They're going to come eat whatever grows out there because it's going to be nutritionally better.

Shane Harris

That's a big statement. You just made it doesn't matter. So and we'll talk about a few, preferences to plant for green plants. But I think what you just said is very, very important for our listeners. It doesn't matter so much as long as you take care of the fertility side first.

Kyle Marable

You get the soil right. And then, like I said, there might be some, you know, you want to make sure there's some palatable plants out there. Within reason there, it almost doesn't matter. So for that reason, when we talk about what to plant, you know, he's talking about the big buck mixes and whatever I usually recommend to keep it very simple.

You can go, you can buy one of those fancy mixes. A lot of them will have a, I just said just a minute ago, don't put your all your hope in 1 or 2 plants and then I'm fixing to go against that. But those big those mixes are going to have a whole bunch of stuff in there.

But the reality is if you've done the limeing, you've done the fertilizing, just keep it simple. And I usually recommend, a mixture of wheat, oats, substitute one of those for cereal rye. What that does is that gives you, something that will come up pretty easily. There's usually not a whole lot of difficulty to get those to come up. It gives you by having especially wheat and oats, you'll have the wheat that usually comes up a little bit first and then the oats that will kind of last a little bit longer. So you can kind of run through the whole season a little bit better. And they're usually cheap, you don't have to go buy the really expensive mix.

You can just go to whatever seed store you have and see what kind of generic wheat they've got. Awnless, if you go the wheat route, awnless wheat would be preferred, over. Because it's more palatable. But, other than that, you know, just keep it simple. If you really want to throw a little something extra in there, a clover could be mixed in as well.

And that's a good option if you're kind of wanting to drag it into, on into spring. On into the summer, you can put a clover mix in there and that kind of depends on how wet it is, how dry it is, how much sun, shade, whatever as to which one you pick.

Chip East

Cereal rye, wheat, and oats. And you mentioned clover, but crimson clover or another clover.

Kyle Marable

A lot of times would be a white clover, maybe a red, maybe a crimson. But it just kind of mostly depends on the site as to what you choose, clover wise.

Chip East

But those are cool season crops. We would plant those, what time of year, Kyle.

Kyle Marable

Most of this planting is going to be done in September through October. Weather plays a big factor in that. You know, we are in the middle of a drought. How moist is the soil? But most of Alabama is pretty mild winter, so you can get away pushing it back a little bit if you have to. But usually sometime in that September to October range.

Chip East

Name 2 or 3 warm season plants that we could plant later on this spring.

Kyle Marable

So, you know, the kind of depends again, back on your goals. And I won't go into a whole lot of, of detail on my, opinions of warm season food plots. There's clovers, there's warm season clovers that are good options. There's also, a lot of your stuff, like cow peas and, different kinds of legumes that you plant. So you really going to focus on the high protein plants if you're going for something that is a growing season, summertime food plot.

Chip East

But any kind of a bean or pea.

Kyle Marable

Beans and peas kind of typically, there's some that's going to do better. I would check your site. But those are going to be typical. Those high protein legumes.

Chip East

I've grown sunn hemp, it grows tall.

Kyle Marable

Yeah. So it just kind of depends. So, but yeah, those are all the options for those warm season. If we're looking at doing food plots in the winter, we're looking more at energy. So we're providing the nutritional need for winter. Even in Alabama, where it's pretty mild, is going to be energy. Whereas if you're looking at like a summer food plot, you're looking at protein primarily because that's when you have antler growth, that's when you have lactating females. And so that is the main need for that time of year.

Chip East

Kyle, we have these food plots and animals are coming to them. Do you see more predators come into the food plots? They're doing a little hunting too. Do we see any predator go up or down in population around a food plot?

Kyle Marable

That's going to be another one of those very site specific things. But when you make a food plot, it is important to keep that in mind. So make sure that there's good access in and out from multiple directions on a food plot. Don't make it to where there's only really one way in, one way out, because you know whether predators are a problem or not on your property. If you make it easy for them, it absolutely, could be an issue. And then I also recommend exclusion cages too. For but it's, so you take some, like, chicken wire or something, like that. Make a little small little just cage cylinder that you can set up the middle of your field. And that gives you instant feedback as to how well that's growing and how much it's being used by deer.

So if it's look out there and it's really tall in that exclusion cage and really short everywhere else, get eaten a lot. If it's really tall across the board, it's not. If it's really short across the board, didn't grow well, but you get that instant feedback of what's going on.

Chip East

That's good advice that helps us know what to do differently the next year.

Shane Harris

Kyle, we thank you so much for being on another episode of *Southern Ground*. This has been very valuable information. Our time has gotten away from us again, Chip and these discussions always seem to go a little longer than we'd like but it's such great information. If you need help on planting a greenfield or a food plot or other supplemental plantings for wildlife or any kind of gardening or farming questions, be sure to reach out to us Extension agents and specialists through the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

These publications and literature and information is on our website at [aces.edu](http://aces.edu). That's [www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu), and you can find there and get more information, videos, literature, publications, advice on anything that you're trying to grow. So Chip, another good day on. Hey, there's no reason why we shouldn't have a big buck on our greenfields this coming fall.

Chip East

Absolutely. Shane. Good to be here with you today. Kyle. Thank you so much for joining us.

Kyle Marable

Thank y'all for having me.

Shane Harris

We appreciate it by listening to another episode of *Southern Ground*.

Announcer

*Southern Ground* has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.