



Food Plot Success Summit with Gene Matchen of Moultrie Products

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Food Plot Success Summit - Gene Matchen

Ralph: Thanks, Dave. Today at TrophyBuckSecrets.com, we're continuing our teleseminar series about food plots. Our special guest today is Gene Matchen of Moultrie Products. Mr. Matchen will be sharing his insights into the differences between planting in the north and planting in the south. Also, we're going to hear some time-saving and money-saving tips on how to plant food plots on a budget or, as a friend once told me, sirloin food plots on a hamburger budget.

Thanks for joining us today, Gene.

Gene: No problem. I'm looking forward to it.

Ralph: Gene, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and the work you do at Moultrie?

Gene: Certainly. I've been here at Moultrie for nine years now, going on 10, working in the customer service department. I'm the customer service manager. We field hundreds of calls daily about questions about food plots, questions about products. I thought about it 10 years ago when Dan, who's one of my best friends, called me and decided he wanted me to come join him over here. Of course, hunting has been part of my life of my life, and it was just like being invited to Christmas dinner. I said, "Yes, sir, " and haven't looked back since.

It's truly one of the best jobs I've ever had. I don't even look at it as a job. It's just my heart, and whenever you're working where your heart is, then that's the best job to have.

Ralph: Absolutely. Fielding that many calls in one day or over a period of weeks, you probably hear a lot of the same types of problems from people. What are some of the most common mistakes that you hear that people make when using your products or when planting food plots?

Gene: To be honest with you, the biggest thing... It's comical, because I'm just like this. When I get something new, I buy it, and I know how to use it. I take it out to set it up, and when I hit a snag, I'm looking for my instructions. Usually I've thrown the instructions away with the box, so I have to call in and figure out how to set my product up properly and all that. To be honest with you, I get a lot of those calls from people out in the field, and they've misplaced their instructions or something. Most of my people have to walk them through setting up their product, which is actually an enjoyable call. It's not a problem.

It's just like I am. I am exactly the same way. I know what I'm doing. Leave me alone. That's the mentality, and we get a lot of those calls.

The biggest issue as far as the biggest question that we field around planting season, prior to hunting season, is what type of product to buy for their given situation. Do I buy a 30-gallon tripod feeder, or do I buy a six and a half gallon feeder? I think that's one of the biggest things that we talk about with our customers.

Ralph: I'm glad you mentioned feeders because just a few minutes before we started recording this interview, we were talking about the functions of a food plot, but also using feeders in combination. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Gene: Absolutely. If I could tell any hunter, if he's asking me what's the best set-up for my property, and I'm going to plant food plots, which is necessary. Food plots are absolutely necessary, but they work even better in conjunction with a supplemental feeder. Like I said, you don't go home and eat salad every night. You actually have salad, and maybe some corn, and maybe some soybean. Well, I don't, but the deer like soybean, like the protein of soybean. But you don't go home and eat salad. You want a little steak in there every now and then.

The whole purpose of food plots and supplemental feeding is simply, first of all and foremost, just to provide the deer with the nutrition they need so they don't have to go looking for it, and secondly is to pattern the deer to come where you want them to come during these times of feeding.

In most states, food plots are perfectly legal and encouraged, in all states they are. But supplemental feeding is something you'd need to check with your DNR of your specific state. Some states do not allow it at all and others only it during non-hunting time, during the non-hunting, and then some states allow you to feed all year round.

So it is something that you would need to check out with your local DNR or state DNR. But I highly recommend the combination of both if you can do it.

Ralph: The whole United States is so different, from north to south, east to west with all these various climates and weather patterns. What are the differences between the north and south that you should consider whenever you are going to plant a food plot?

Gene: The biggest difference I can think of, Ralph, is in the south, where we're from, we can have food plots year-round for the most part. Now we have gotten more snow this year than I've ever seen in my life, but most of the time we can keep food plots all year-round down here. We can keep the deer coming to the same field all year-round. Up north, they don't have that luxury. A lot of the year is covered or frozen with snow, and to be honest with you, to plant and then for it just to snow on top of it is a waste of money.

So the difference is that I would say is to make sure that when you are planting in the northern states, and some northern states aren't as bad as others. You're talking Michigan and Wisconsin, they're going to probably plant once a year, to be honest with you, keep their food plots through the summer.

Here in the south, August is becoming a target date of when we plant our fall food plots, August or even early September. If I was up north, I'd probably start that process as early as I could in the summer and maintain them just to give them a longer time, because there's a short window in some states as to how long they'll be able to utilize a food plot up there.

Ralph: Where approximately would that dividing line in the United States be as far as what separates the north? Is there particular states that you would say, you know, "That's north and you know this is south."

Gene: I would probably say northern Kentucky would probably be the furthest south because Kentucky gets a good bit of snow too, and more colder weather than we do. But probably the southeastern United States, the southwestern United States is not going to have any kind of problem planting all year round, keeping food process sustained all year round. When you start

getting up, northern Missouri, northern Kentucky, Ohio, Pennsylvania, of course, it's kind of hit or miss up there in those states, but any further north, they're going to have to deal with the weather, and that affects everything.

One of the things that is, that's a lot, most of the Michigan and a lot of Wisconsin, there's a lot of farmland so usually the deer don't have to worry too much about food sustenance because it is readily available except for those few months when they are foraging around.

Ralph: Right.

Gene: But if I lived in those northernmost states probably around the Great Lakes, definitely the New England states, I would definitely start my food plots as soon as the ground thaws, maybe in June, maybe even May and try to sustain them through the summer to try to pattern the deer before hunting season comes in.

Ralph: OK. And are there certain types of plants that work best in the north?

Gene: Yes, deer down here in Alabama probably wouldn't know what alfalfa is. It is very, very area specific and the hunters that you have in your given states are probably going to know what product works best for them out there. Alfalfa is really big in the Midwest and even up north. Probably rye is really good up north. It's a very durable plant that can handle different weather conditions. Deer are going to eat what they have readily available to eat. When, like I said, our deer down here love wheat, they love chicory, rye, pretty much any clover. I think clover would probably be something that's pretty nationwide, I think a deer would, any deer would eat clover as long as they could get to it. But like I said, alfalfa, some states, wheat, probably most states wheat, but I would definitely not go out and buy a bunch of alfalfa for down here.

I'm trying to think of something that I probably wouldn't buy for up north. Wheat, wheat is probably a good general food source that you could buy and be pretty safe.

Ralph: OK. When you are talking about clover and chicory and all that, what are the nutritional differences between the two? Is there one that is higher in nutrients than the other?

Gene: Those are two really good sources of protein and nutrients. Wheat and rye are very good as well. Probably would be the main thing you're trying to get them to do is eat. This source of nutrition that they need and as far as the... They love clover. Clover is high in protein and alfalfa is high in protein, chicory is a leafy plant that they seem to like, tender leafy plant. As far as the nutritional differences, they all have chelated minerals in them that is what they need. Like I said, I don't know if one is better or higher in nutrition than the other. The main thing is just to make sure they eat. Give something that they will forage on to get this chelated minerals that they need.

Ralph: OK. What is your ideal food plot?

Gene: Mine? Down here where I normally hunt, or in Texas, it depends. I love a blend of all things because again, I think variety is better. But down here, I probably get a blend of wheat, rye, chicory, clover. Now, if I'm on a budget, which everybody is probably going to be this year, my sources would be much different. But as far as my choice of what I would plant, if I had the choice, would be a combination of chicory and wheat, and even rye and clover.

Ralph: OK. You mention the budget will be different, how so?

Gene: Well, there are a few things that I tell customers when they call and say, "What can I do and save the most money?" The first thing that I can recommend to everyone no matter where you live is spent \$10 and do a pH test of your soil, and there are a couple of reasons why. Some ground needs fertilization because the pH level is off, and you are going to need, and it will tell you exactly what kind of fertilizer and how much you need. Let's just face it, fertilization is probably the most expensive part of a food plant. If you don't need it or you don't need what you are using, then you are just wasting that money. That is the biggest thing that I think that people that are on a budget...

Most of the hunting clubs down here, everyone is in the budget because you are using a conglomeration of money and you have a lot of things that you're having to spend money on such as deer blinds and tractor work and all that.

So, to save money, one of the biggest things... The first step I would do to plant a food plant on a budget or to get, like you said, a sirloin food plant with a hamburger budget, is first just go ahead and take a pH test on the soil. It will tell you what you need to do or what's going on with your soil.

Ralph: How do you do that? I've been thinking about this. Do you do just use one spot or do you need several sample spots from around the property? I was thinking like how deep do you have to dig for a sample? Can you explain the process?

Gene: It's real simple. You don't have to take multiple samples. If you've got an area that you think is pH different because of where it is, whether it's a low area or something like that, you may want to take another one. Generally what you want to do is get in the ballpark. It's sort of like sighting a rifle. You're trying to get on the paper there and then you're going to tweak it more. For a 1,000 acre piece of property, I think probably one soil sample would be enough.

Again, we're on a budget and we're just trying to determine if I'm going to need to fertilize it and if so, how much and what type of fertilizer then. Soil may need lime. Lime is sort of expensive and messy. But, I would recommend people only liming every other year or maybe even every third year. Again, take that pH sample and then say exactly what you need to do.

Because let's just face it, if you don't, and all of us have had food plots that we've planted, we've put in the time, we've fertilized. We've done everything that we know to do and they just haven't come up properly. Well that's a big waste of money when a \$10 test could have told you exactly what you needed to do. That's just the biggest money saver I think you can do and it's going to cost you \$10, in some states \$5.

Ralph: OK. Say you get those sample tests back and find that your soil is just really bad, say in extreme cases, you have really sandy soil or clay or rocky or whatever, what can you do in those different types of soil?

Gene: Again the test is going to tell you, you have this kind of pH... Probably what you're going to need to do is fertilize with lime, for an example. Then you go spend your money on the lime and you go ahead and mix it into the soil and just give it a try. But, now if you're talking about sandy,

real sandy soil, you may want to think of another area to plan your food plot. But again, the test will tell you what you need to do. It's just the best spending of \$10 that you can ever hope to get.

You have to do it early because most of us, like me, we have work days at the hunting club in August. This should be done well before even thinking about planting the food plots so you'll know exactly what needs to be done.

Obviously, you're going to try to select an area that's first of all, conducive with what you've seen in the deer traffic. Really what you're trying to do is make it easier for them and to hold them in the area, so you're going to pick a spot that's good.

Then once you test the soil and determine that it might not be the best place to do a food plot, then don't waste your time and money. Go find another place. There's plenty of them out there.

But like I said, the pH test will answer all questions. There will be no doubt as to what you need to do to make your soil proper for growth.

Ralph: OK. Can you share some of your personal success stories with food plot?

David: Yes. One other thing, Ralph, I wanted to mention on the budget is the marketing that we do on the mix seed and stuff like that. And like I said, my preference is to have a variety. But if you're on a budget, you can go to your local co-op and find a single seed, a non mixture - in other words a single seed - and stick with that. Down here, like I said, I've been mentioning wheat a lot. Wheat is a very common source of food for all deer, I believe. No matter where you are in the country, wheat is something that you can get that they will forage on, and wheat is relatively inexpensive.

Just some other tips for hunters is that you can go to these co-ops and find busted bags and stuff like that that you can get just dirt cheap, literary. They're making a mess in the co-op and they're wanting to get rid of them and they will... I've actually done that for a few years, go to the co-op and find busted bags and be able to get them at a steal.

Ralph: Wow.

Gene: And that's something that will definitely help with planting a food plot on a budget. Little things and little experiences that all hunters have had to save money, because let's just face it, Mama don't want you spending the grocery money on food plots.

Ralph: [laughs] Speaking of these busted bags, do seeds ever go bad? Is there like a timetable on excellent seeds?

David: Excellent question. I read - and I can't even think of where I read it from - that one particular hunter when he was thinking you can buy year old seeds. Some farmers now will not, well most farmers, won't buy year old seed. But when you are talking about food plots, there is a quick test that you can do if it's a year old or two year old seed that the co-op has, and again, an excellent way to save a bunch of money, because they're willing to get rid of it. They need to get rid of it.

Is to get a paper towel, wet it, put some of the seed on there and let it sit for a few days. If the seeds OK, it will start germinating and sprouting and you'll know that it's a good bag. So it may take a couple of days, but it's well worth the test, and it's real simple to find out if it's good or bad seed. But again, you can get that stuff really cheap and inexpensive, because you're doing them a favor by buying it.

Ralph: Right.

Gene: And you know what, the deer don't care. As long as it grows they don't care.

Ralph: Sure, that's true. I didn't realize that they germinated that fast.

Gene: For a couple of days if you put on a paper towel, and like I said, you don't put a lot of it, just sprinkle some on there and make sure the towel is good and wet and as it dries you'll... Put it in the sunshine, obviously, and you can tell if the seed will germinate or not.

Ralph: OK. That's brings up another question. [laughs] Just now you mentioned about putting it in sunshine. Wherever you plant your food plots, how do determine what areas as far as how much light to get because it is possible for some seeds to get burnt out by too much light, or does some require little bit more shading?

Gene: The food that we've been talking about can take as much sunlight as you can give it.

Ralph: Yeah.

Gene: But the problem is the opposite of that. You plant food plots in a meadow, and depending on - again going back to the budget - you certainly don't want to throw seed in shady areas where it's not going to grow, that's just a waste. Most of them are always going to be backed up, unless you're down in Texas, are going to be surrounded by trees and foliage that, you know nothing's going to grow. So if you have the ability to cut down undesirable trees such as pine trees... I don't mean undesirable, I'm just talking about for food, for deer nutrition. You certainly don't want to cut any hardwoods or oaks because that's another source of nutrition for the deer. But, pine trees and sycamore trees and those things just really don't give any value to the deer herd.

If there's a way you can get rid of those around the food plot that would take sunlight away from the seed growing in the food plot and we've all had this issue. I'm the world's worst, when I get in a mode of planting and then, I'm just throwing seeds. If you throw it in those shady areas, it's just not going to grow, no matter what you do. No matter how much fertilizer you put down, they're just not going to grow.

But as far as too much sun, I've never had one of my food plots burn up because of too much sun and we get a good bit down here.

Ralph: OK. So a common recommendation that I've read is to have three to five percent of your total acreage in food plots. How about in agricultural areas? Do cash crops, like corn and soy bean, count towards the food plot acreage?

Gene: Absolutely, absolutely because they're going to eat it. So it definitely would. As far as three, four percent in food plots, that'd be great if you could do that.

Ralph: OK.

Gene: That would be an excellent source of food and I can't see why the deer would travel. Other than in some of those farming states where, it's a smorgasbord of food for them to eat at anytime, anywhere. I don't know of any food probably you could plant that would keep a deer from going to a cornfield. [laughter]

Ralph: Right, they've all got the sweet tooth.

Gene: Yeah. [laughter]

Ralph: I asked you a few questions here and we kind of got sidetracked, but what are some of your personal success stories with food plots?

Gene: Like I said, the most successful that I have ever seen is a food plot in association with a supplemental feeder. It's just more than they can stand. It gives them everything they need, right in one spot. I like growing soy beans during the off season such as in... Again, we can feed, up here in Alabama, as long as it's not 10 days before hunting season starts. Of course, we can't feed at all during hunting season. But during the spring and summer months, I like, if you can do it, if you get your deer trained to have a good food plot of whatever your choice is. In Alabama, we can pretty much do anything. Like I said, I probably wouldn't spend the money on alfalfa because even though they'd probably eat it, it's just not something that readily grows.

Take your choice, wheat, rye, throw it out there, plant it and then supplement it with soybean during the summer months, and right before the hunting season also give a bit of corn to it. Corn is like candy to deer. They smell it a mile away and they'll come running.

But if you get them used to eating the soybean along with grazing in the food plot, that's the ultimate, I would think, in success in any supplemental program for the deer. I think it's pretty easy to do anywhere as long as they allow broadcasting feeding in your state. Again, check with your local DNR on that.

Ralph: OK. How much do food plots and the nutrients the deer get from these plants, how much does that really contribute to growing large racks?

Gene: Well, that's a good question. If you're wanting to increase the health of your herd, something that we... I grew up in a time where shooting does was against the law. You could not shoot a doe expect on given days, and you'd have to have special tags for those. That has trained us, as hunters - my age group of hunters, which is middle age, 40's and 50's - that it is hard to shoot a doe because of the way you were raised hunting. You just didn't shoot does. Again, people don't realize that hunters are the biggest conservationists in the world, and we want to do what's right. We want to do what's right for the deer herd. We want to do what's right within the law.

Now, the laws have changed because the doe populations have gotten so big. A lot of the reasons that... If you're not seeing the antler growth that you would like to see in your particular hunting area, check your doe populations. Check with a biologist. Your state should have a biologist on board that can help you with this information, your deer herd information.

He may tell you that you need you take 30 or 40 does out this season, and that's going to help. Because when there's too many deer in an area, and most of them are does, then they are going to be sucking up all the nutrition that is necessary for proper and good healthy and for growth. As far as antler growth, the first step I would do is to make sure your doe population is under control.

Secondly, deer are only going to be able to ingest 16 percent protein, make sure they are getting that much. You can get protein through mineral blocks and mineral licks. Soybean is an excellent source of protein. Or you can put feeding troughs out during the off season that they will come to that is an excellent source of protein, and even it will help the deer fight infection.

That's also a very good source of protein that's usually in the trough, that you get them patterning to come there to get that, and they will. A deer is the most amazing creature in the world. They will find the minerals they need. What we're trying to do is to make sure that they find them without having to go too far.

Mineral licks and food trough feeding is an excellent source of good proper healthy antler growth. Again, the biggest thing is to make sure your does aren't eating up all your protein. Make sure you check with your biologist and see. Sometimes, I know in Alabama and in Texas they will definitely tell you, you need to take X amount of does in this area.

Ralph: What is the most important tip you can give somebody who, say, just bought 1,000 acres and wants to turn that 1,000 acres into a deer magnet? What's the most important thing you can tell them?

Gene: The biggest thing is, again, I'd check with a biologist first and see what my deer herd is and that will kindly tailor you around what you need to do. And again, it's like anything else. I can buy a Volkswagen or I can buy a Mercedes Benz, it depends on how much money I want to spend. If you've got 1,000 acres and you want to turn it into a place where deer will come to get the sustenance they need, you're going to have to provide it. That's going to be in food plots, supplemental feeding as far as trough feeding for protein, mineral licks.

As far as how many you need, with 1,000 acres, I'd probably have at least 16 to 18 food plots, if not more, the more the better.

Ralph: Wow! OK. How big would you make those food plots?

Gene: You see, that's another thing. In two facets, it's to save money and to cut down on how many. Now if you've got an acre food plot, that's about the size of, for easy math, just say a football field. If you're getting one section of that football field used, then you may want to consider breaking it down into fours, quad it up. And say, well, I don't need an acre lot here. I need maybe a quarter acre here and a half acre over here, just basically common sense. If you've got an area that is not heavily populated, you're going to be able to tell if it's heavily populated or not, if it's heavily populated you may want a bigger food plot. You may want an acre food plot.

If not, then I like to keep mine small. Again, it also depends on your set-up. I've been to some places in some areas that have condominiums for shooting houses that will allow you to make a pretty long shot from where you are.

If you're hunting out of a tree, I just don't want an acre food plot to hunt over. Most of the time, an acre food plot is just not going to be all used. That's probably overkill. You just want to make sure you don't have overkill on food plots. Remember, that's just one source of food for the deer. They will seek out other...

If there's acorns on the ground, I don't care what you plant, they're going to be in woods on the acorns. But that is the sirloin steak for a deer.

[laughter]

Ralph: So it's just about knowing what's already on your property, and...?

Gene: The first step in that is getting the biologists to help you with your deer population to know what you've got. Most states do extensive studies on this, so it shouldn't be something that you have to wait on very long. Then basically providing them the proper... 1,000 acres, if it's all flat land and you own it and you can clear timber, like I said, that's a Mercedes. But if it's leased land that you have limited availability of what you can do, then you're pretty much subject to what you have. Most people aren't going to let you alter the land or cut trees just for that.

But if you own the land you can set it the way you want to, 1,000 acres, a minimum of 16, maximum of 30 even, depending on how big they are.

Ralph: We have one more question and it's just are there any final tips for somebody starting a new food plot?

Gene: Well, just to summarize a little bit of what we've gone over, the high points. If I was starting out tomorrow to do this, first of all, take a pH test of your soil. Find out what you need to do as far as fertilization, if any, to that food plot. If there's anything you have to cut, I would suggest it would be the fertilizer because it is the most expensive. It's going to be sometimes three to four times more expensive than the seed itself. Again, choose a single seed product instead of a blend to save money on the seeding. Again, perfect scenario, I like to have a variety, but that doesn't mean that's going to be... The deer are going to eat anything. As long as you provide them with the nutrition that they're looking for at the time, wheat, rye, for example.

A good perennial would be clover. It's a very resilient plant. You would pretty much have to mow it once a year and it will last a couple of years. That would help out in some expenses as well.

But supplemental feeding, when you can, is always more desirable. Along with the food plot, have your supplemental feeders out there just to ring the dinner bell and pattern your deer to come when you want them to come out to feed.

As far as protein, mineral licks that are high in related minerals and protein along with the food pellets fed usually in a trough, they will come to that and get their protein source from the feed, and those pellets help fight down infection in the deer herd as well.

So that would be my biggest suggestion. Definitely in these economic times that we're in, try to save money as much as you can. That would be the best way. Like I said, if you have to cut anything, cut your fertilizer or cut it way down. But get that pH test to find out if you need to do it.

Ralph: Well, it's really been a pleasure talking to you today Gene.

Gene: I hope I've been able to help out the few hundred out there that were wondering what would be the best way to plant their food plots this year.

Ralph: For all the listeners who would like to learn more about mulching products, can you give us your web address?

Gene: Absolutely: www.moultriefeeders.com.

Ralph: Thanks again.

Gene: All right. Thanks a lot.

Ralph: And thank you to all the folks who have been listening to this installment of the trophy buck secrets seminar series. I'm Ralph Scherder and once again, here's Dave Barrett.

Dave: Thanks Ralph, and thank you Gene for taking the time to be with us. And especially thanks to you for listening in on the call.

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