

Food Plot Success Summit with Jon Cooner of Whitetail Institute

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Food Plot Success Summit - Jon Cooner

David Barrett: Hello and welcome to the Food Plot Success Summit. You're going to be glad you decided to take the time to be here tonight, because you're going to hear some great information that will truly improve your results with food plots. Hi, Dave Barrett here. I'm the founder of Trophy Buck Secrets, and I've put together this unique event to dedicated deer hunters just like you.

Now, let's get right to it. Here's Ralph Scherder to introduce our first guest on the Food Plot Success Summit.

Ralph Scherder: Thanks, Dave. Today at TrophyBuckSecrets.com we welcome special guest Jon Cooner of the Whitetail Institute. Mr. Cooner will be sharing his insights into what it takes to get started planning successful food plots. We'll talk about the whole planning process, as well as the biggest mistakes hunters make, and how to avoid them. If any of our listeners are like me, they have tried planning food plots in the past, but the results of their efforts just weren't up to par. It was frustrating. I felt like all that work was for nothing. So hopefully Mr. Cooner will help me as well as all you folks listening in. I don't want to be frustrated by this anymore. I just want to plan a successful food plot.

So thanks for joining us today, Jon.

Jon Cooner: Glad to be here.

Ralph: Jon, can you please tell our listeners at Trophy Buck Secrets a little bit about yourself and how you became involved with food plotting?

Jon: Sure. I've been working with the Whitetail Institute for quite a few years. I guess I got started just by the way most people do, I'm a hunter. I've always enjoyed it. I love to hunt, and actually I started out making my own no-till food plot blends for myself and my buddies, and the first time I tried the Imperial No Plow it was better than anything I could make. That sort of got me on the road, and I've been doing it for a few years and I really enjoy it. It's great to have a job where you can get up in the morning and go do something that you really love. What could be better than talking to deer hunters all day long?

Ralph: I know what you mean. Yes, it's a good life.

Jon: It is.

Ralph: We're going to jump right in here and get to food plotting.

Jon: OK.

Ralph: In the past 20 years, it seems like that particular part of the industry has really boomed.

Jon: Oh, absolutely, it has.

Ralph: Do you ever meet any skeptics who think that food plots are overrated or not worth the effort?

Jon: Actually, not as many as you'd think. The Whitetail Institute started the whole science and practices, I guess, that you'd refer to as quality deer management. We started that whole trend back in 1988 when we came out with our first food plot blend, Imperial Whitetail Clover. Since then, the sciences and practices of deer management have grown by leaps and bounds, and they've all been brought together into, at this point, I guess you'd refer to it as quality deer management.

Of course, we're not responsible for all of that, but we are the genesis of that, that's where it got started. The more time that goes on, the people are getting more and more into this sort of thing, they're getting more advanced in the understanding of how all of these sciences and practices work together.

So there are not many people that I find are skeptical about it as there used to be. It's just from people becoming more educated.

Ralph: What can a deer hunter get from a food plot that it can't get from an area where there are no food plots?

Jon: Well, I guess you have to start with the assumption that you're talking about an area that has deer. If you're in the middle of some desert or something where there are no deer, it's not going to do a lot of good. So we're, of course, talking about areas where there are deer. Naturally, deer get plenty of food in most places, except in bad times, once in a while they don't. Enough nutrition to survive, make babies, grow antlers, they get plenty of nutrition naturally to do that.

What we're talking about with food plots, nutritionally speaking, is not to help them survive, although that could help them in some cases, what we're trying to do is to help them maximize their genetic potential.

We've all been to these deer shows, and we've seen these little triangles of the three parts of growing better deer, and they're genetics, age and nutrition.

Age is pretty simple to manipulate, you just don't shoot the little deer until they grow up. It doesn't matter how good a buck's genes are, he's not going to grow his biggest set of antlers that he can until he's five and a half, six and a half years old, until he matures, so you've got to let him grow up.

The second factor is genetics. In a free range situation, that's very hard to manipulate. It would take a lot of time, plus half of each baby's genes are going to be Mama's, and her genes don't show up on her head.

So by far, the one that is the most changeable by most hunters is to change the nutrition side of it. That's one reason that food plots, and also mineral vitamin supplements in the spring and summer are very important, properly formulated ones, not stuff that you make at home. That's not the way to go. That sort of thing to boost nutrition, to give the deer the opportunity, not the opportunity, but the resources that he needs nutritionally to be the best that he can be.

If you think about it, you and I probably played basketball when we were young. Well, neither one of us has the genetic potential to be a Michael Jordan. But if we eat better, and exercise, but

nutritionally, if we eat better, we're probably going to be able to perform at a higher level given our genetic makeup.

That's exactly what we're doing with nutrition with deer.

Ralph: Realistically, you talked about the genetics and all that, but how much of a benefit do food plots actually have? Realistically, how much can a hunter expect from these food plots, as far as helping antler growth?

Jon: Every situation is different, but I'll give you some objective proof of whether or not food plots work. If you look at the trophy record bucks of Boone and Crockett and Pope and Young since 1988, 20 years ago when the institute got started, the average annual number of record book bucks has increased 500 percent. Now there's a reason for that. It's not all food plots. It's again, having the unified discipline of quality deer management that involves all these different aspects, but nutrition is a very big part and food plots are a very big part of that.

Again, what we're trying to do is to give them the resources that will allow them to achieve more of what their genetic blueprints will allow. To do that, you've got to supplement in almost all cases.

Ralph: Right, and it's not just one thing that makes a big buck, it's multiple factors.

Jon: Absolutely. That's true, and when you think about it, we always think about the spring/summer antler growth period. Well, yeah, that's about 200 days in spring and summer. That's when antler formation is taking place. But there are lots of other things happening, too. Does are pregnant in the third trimester of pregnancy, and later on they're making milk for the newborn fawns. Nutrition plays an important part of that, too. There is some research out there that shows that if they're dropping a bigger fawn, you're probably going to have bigger racks. It's logical.

But think about doe milk, for instance. Doe milk is extremely nutrient dense, much more so than cow's milk, and supplementing can help them produce more. Lots of little things like that. But it all plays in together.

Ralph: It's funny, you mentioned about different seasons deer need different things. I've often heard there's a big difference between a nutritional food plot and a hunting food plot. What are some of those differences?

Jon: There's not really a difference between a nutritional food plot and a hunting food plot. There are differences in quality and availability and nutrient content, things like that. Let's say you plant wheat or some forage grain or grass for deer, if it's got more nutritional content than the native grasses do, then, yeah, it's going to help them as a matter of degree. You also have to look at availability. How long is that forage going to be palatable to deer? Remember, to help them out nutritionally, you've got to get them to eat it.

So if you understand, deer are ruminant animals. They're small ruminant animals. But they're not like, cows - cattle are ruminant animals also - but they're able to digest a lot stemmer forages and things like that.

Deer are concentrated select feeders. They'll eat a lot of different things, but only a little narrow range of all these things. They'll eat natural leaves, shoots and buds when they're very tender. As

far as forages go, if you've ever seen... If you've got alfalfa farmers in your area, for instance, if you ever see them plant alfalfa, the deer's going to be all over them when it starts coming up.

Then when it starts getting tall, the deer kind of back off of it. The farmer will come in and mow it, then all of a sudden the deer are back on it, and what they're doing is they're hitting that tender new growth.

The cows would just stay there and wipe it out. They'd just keep going. But the deer cannot utilize those stemy forages. So things like grains, a lot of times they'll get going, they're just really attractive to deer in the first six inches or so, but after they mature they become less so. So you've got the availability, even though it's out there, the deer might not be using it because it's not compatible with its digestive system.

Ralph: OK. What are some of your personal success stories with food plots, as far as the areas where you hunt?

Jon: I'll tell you a couple of tricks that work real well, one that I figured out for myself. Again, whenever you think of somebody inventing an idea, everybody's thought of everything before. But you can think of things yourself and by gosh you invented it for you and that's fine. This is one that I invented for me that works real well. I hunt in Alabama primarily and we've got a lot of pine plantations down here. I was riding along with the land owner one day, and the pine trees were right up against the road. All of a sudden they went back off the road and there was a big, open clearing, and then they came back. I said, "Why didn't they plant that area right there?" This was years ago. He said, "We did, they just didn't take."

So I thought about that and I started thinking and I had an idea and I didn't know what it was and then it came to me. I thought, man if the pine trees didn't take there then maybe there's some places way back in those pines where they didn't take that I can make me a little food plot.

I decided to investigate that. So during the summer time, it was hot - I'll never forget it, it was probably 100 degrees - but I put on a heavy jacket, some gloves, and a face mask and went on my four-wheeler crunching back in these planted pines.

It was thick, there were briars everywhere, but I found some openings. I found some places where one row of pines had not taken. It was maybe 75, 80 yards long, maybe 10, 15 yards wide, something like that, where a row hadn't taken. I also found some little third quarter acre round places, kind of openings, where they hadn't taken. I remember, back then, that was when I was doing my own no-till blends.

I went back and I took a lawnmower, a old riding lawnmower, and literally drug it around behind the four-wheeler as a homemade brush cutter and got everything knocked down. I did three of them and on the last pass, this was just providence looking out for me, on the last pass on the last plot I heard kachunk and I turned around and oil was squirting out the exhaust and the mower was dead, but it was an old piece of junk anyway.

I ended up planting those plots. I remember I went to the store and bought some little plastic chairs and put one on each end for the wind. I could sit out there all day and take a book, and all day long

the deer would feed in and out of these plots because they felt safe. Nobody was back there. I had real good luck doing that because they had access to cover.

That's one of the thing that's so important. I don't care how nutritious a food plot is, deer won't use it if they don't feel safe using it. If you remind me, we'll talk about linear edge and things like that later.

Another idea that a customer taught me that just works like gangbusters. I don't know if you're familiar with it, we have a spring/summer annual called Powerplant. It's very, very good blend. It's strictly for spring and summer, high protein forage.

It puts out more tonnage of high protein forage for deer than any other product like it. It gets about five or six feet tall. It's thick. One thing that a customer had told me is - how can I explain this - let's say you're looking at a piece of notebook paper like you're reading it. Let's say that's a farmer's plot.

A farmer had a bean field out there. Then there's a little peninsula sticking off the bottom right side of that piece of paper. He was a bow hunter and because of the wind, he had to get way out on the far right point of the peninsula. The deer were crossing from the middle of the peninsula, up and down, going top to bottom and they'd walk right across that peninsula and he never could get them in range.

So he planted the whole thing in Powerplant, and then he went back a little bit before the season and just whacked a path through it entering where the deer entered but then bending around toward his stand. His description of it was, he says, "It was like a freakin' highway out there."

The deer would come in and follow that path because, if they're safe, like humans, they'll follow the path of least resistance. But he said it worked very well for that. So you can imagine how excited I was to try that out. Those were two things that worked very well.

Ralph: So what I've kind of getting a sense of here, so far, is that it doesn't necessarily take a lot of land to make a food plot.

Jon: Oh absolutely it doesn't. What you want to try to do... If you have a smaller property, and I do, I've got a little 78 acres that I lease from the bank. That's my primary hunting place. That's where I go that's close to the house. The main thing that you want to do is make that piece of property a place where deer feel like they're going to be safe during the hunting season. I put some plots in. I put them towards the center of the property, I have two, and I left everything else thick. That keeps people from having the urge to poach if they're wanting to do that kind of thing, they can't see the plots. Also, I've left it thick all around there and I just don't go in during hunting season except just to get to my stand and get out. I have very little human footprint in there.

The deer have access to water. There's a little creek running through it. They have access to my food plots and they have lots of thick stuff. When the guns start going off and the truck doors start banging, that's where they head.

Every year, we've gone in there and taken a good deer out of it, at least one. In fact, there's one we've got trail camera pictures of this year who, by my standards down here, is a whopper. He's

probably five and a half years old and he's probably 135 points, which is pretty good for down here. We've got bigger deer. But on a 78 acre property, it's pretty darn good.

The key, again, is to make sure you have the food available and to keep your human footprint and presence as light as possible so the deer feel safe being there. They'll hole up on your place.

Ralph: As far as other things concerning site location, do you like there to be dense cover around it near bedding areas?

Jon: Oh yes. This is a good chance to get into what I talked about with linear edge. When you're structuring a food plot, that big piece of notebook paper I'm talking about, that's not the way to go. It sounds kind of trite, but think like a buck. If you've got a big, fat, wide-open plot, that buck's not going to want to come out there. He might mess up during the rut and run out there and you may get a shot, but it's better to do all you can to make the plot attractive, not only with what you plant but also how you structure it. One idea about that, one concept, is called linear edge. By linear edge, what I mean is any place that the food plot that you planted butts up to something that the deer would see as cover, whether it's real cover or just something they perceive as cover.

They're more likely to use the plot during daylight hours and they're also more likely to go out to the center of the plot and use more of it if they feel really comfortable. The ways to increase linear edge, instead of having your piece of notebook paper, think about the edges of the paper, let the edges wander in and out a little bit to increase the length of that edge. See what I'm saying?

Ralph: Right, right. I've got you.

Jon: OK. Then, also, what you can do is let's say all you've got is a place that's a piece of notebook paper square like that. Take a plus sign and just superimpose it over the top of that picture. Draw a plus sign across the whole thing, across the whole piece of paper. If we're looking at a notebook paper size, let's say each bar of the plus sign is maybe a quarter inch wide. Those can be strips of cover that you can leave or you can plant in something that the deer can't see through because they see that edge right in front of them. It gives them that feeling that, hey I'm under cover. An excellent way to do that is let's say that you're looking at your piece of notebook paper. Consider that in most places of the country you're going to have a most commonly prevailing wind direction, down here it's usually out of the northwest. We may have what we call that awful south wind and a weird wind from the east once in a while, but usually our wind during the hunting season comes out of the northwest. Now think about this. If you've got your piece of notebook paper that means the wind is coming from the top left corner. You with me?

Ralph: Yes. So far, so good.

Jon: OK. What you can do is go around to the downwind corner or edge, which is down somewhere around the bottom right hand corner and figure out where you're going to put your stand. Then, instead of planting the whole square, what you can do is plant it in strips. They're like spokes of a wheel that you can see down, strips that run from the strand up to the northwest and leave a strip of cover in-between each one. A deer is coming, let's say coming from the bottom left hand corner, is going to walk up from the brush and he'll look and he'll see that little narrow food plot there. Well, he's got a wall just past that and hey I feel safe. Well, he doesn't know that you're at the bottom right hand corner looking down every one of those lanes with your rifle.

What you've done there is you have really packed that plot with linear edge, and you've given him the feeling of a little bit better safety coming out into that. You can do that in a lot of different ways. Other ways to create linear edge, leave a blob of cover, leave a fallen tree, and that kind of thing.

But you could set it up by stripping that way so that you take advantage of the most commonly prevailing wind direction and give your deer a real feeling of safety.

Ralph: So it's more than just seeing a field, plowing up that field, and planting seeds. There's a lot more planning to it.

Jon: Well, there can be. But that's the thing, you don't have to. Anything you do is going to help. What you're trying to do is give them the food to boost their body weight, and their antlers, and that kind of thing, and also to attract them. Yes, if you can do a little planning and understand these concepts, you can have an even more productive food plot from a hunting standpoint.

I'll tell you a couple other just really good designs for a plot. One in the woods that works really well, again, you take advantage of your most commonly prevailing wind, is just a basic L-plot, where the stand is down in the junction of the two bars of the L. This is one of the rules that you try to go by when you're designing a plot: long and skinny is better than wide and fat. That's what that L-shaped plot would do for you.

Another great setup is an hourglass design. If you think about it, you know how the hourglass, you've got two lobes, a little, skinny neck in the middle. You put your stand up somewhere around the skinny neck.

What you'll find a lot of times is that usually the deer will enter one of the lobes. A lot of times they'll do one of two things. They'll either walk through that neck, or they'll at least move out far enough in that lobe to see down the neck to the other lobe to see who's over there.

Those are both really great. They're great plot designs.

Ralph: It's almost like you're creating a natural funnel there, too.

Jon: Sure, absolutely. That's exactly what you're doing. But see, your imagination's really your only limit. If the landowner will let you do it, it's not your land, you can use fencing, blow-downs, and things like that to try to help pattern deer a little bit. On the 78 acres I've got, for instance, there's a creek bottom up at the top of the property, at the northern end rather, and there's a big hill that it drops onto just to the south of that. There are fingers, really gullies, that are going up the hill. The deer can't get up those gullies.

So what you could do, and what I did, is you can take blow-downs, or take a little fencing, or something like that and channel deer into just one or two or three of maybe six different possible little ridges they could walk up to get up the hill. That will help you get your stand in the right place. A lot of things you could do.

Ralph: Yeah definitely. You know, Jon, I've heard all kinds of stories about food plots as far as how hard it is to plant them. Some guys say they're easy to do. Some say they're a nightmare,

nothing but hard work. When you're starting out planting food plots, how important is it to start out on the right foot with good information?

Jon: It is important. It's helpful. I can't say it's super important except in one aspect, and that is soil pH, which I'll get to in a minute. But the best way to learn is, if you're like me and you don't want to sit around studying books for five years before you start planting a food plot, go plant it. Because there are products out there that are designed to plant with minimal ground tillage. Our No-Plow and Secret Spot, those two are designed for no ground tillage. Of course, if you work up a seed bed, they'll do even better. But they'll do just fine.

All you've got to do, the minimum really, is just try to knock down whatever brush and grass you've got and get it off of there just enough so that the seed and the fertilizer make it down to the dirt. They don't get hung up in a grass head or something, then it won't grow. But just get them down on the dirt. If you can do that, that's how I got started, no-till food plot.

When you start getting into it more, there are so many different options, and you need to start understanding if you're going to be doing a prepared seed bed how that works and the important things to hit there. But it's not hard to do.

If you think about it, if you look on the back of an Imperial Forage Blend, for instance, you'll see a set of instructions back there.

The instructions are not hard, and that's because if you think about it from a manufacturer's standpoint, the last thing that we want somebody to do is to pick up a bag of our seed and go, "Man, look at all these instructions. It's too hard, "and not buy it, go buy something else.

So we keep our instructions very simple, and there are just four or five steps. Once you understand how it works, then it is very, very simple to do. There's just a certain order of things that you need to do to get it started.

One of the most important is soil PH. But we'll get into that when you want to. But it's a great thing just to get started and then to learn as you go. Just get a few basics in place before you start actually doing tills, seedbed forages.

Ralph: OK, actually, we had talked about the site location and the next step.

Jon: Right.

Ralph: So the next step would be testing your soil?

Jon: OK, if we're getting into steps, let me back up just a second. We've talked about site selection. If you've got a larger property, let's say you've got more than my 78 acres, you're up into the hundreds or thousands of acres, you've got a few other things that you need to think about first, such as how many plots am I going to have, and what am I going to put in them, OK?

Ralph: OK.

Man 1: There are some rules of thumbs... One of my buddies here and I do a good bit of consulting work, there are some rules of thumb that we follow just to get started when we're

mapping out a plan for somebody. Now, when we map out a plan, we tell them, "Look, we're going to give you the best plan that we can draw. Observe what your deer do, and you're probably going to want to tweak it, based on what your deer do." Now, these are two formulas that I'm going to give you that are starting points that we use as rules of thumb. The first thing is how much acreage am I going to put in food plots? You want enough to give them the nutrition, but if you're going to be hunting, you don't want so many little plots stuck out everywhere that they don't have to go anywhere. You can't hunt them, OK?

Ralph: Competition for yourself, basically.

Jon: Absolutely, absolutely. You could be shooting yourself in the foot growing lots of big deer and they don't ever show up anywhere where you are. So what you look at is look at your property, and also take into account any property that it butts, if it's a good bedding area, if it's a National Forest or something, the first formula is you want to take your total property acreage and figure out how much you're going to put in plots.

Most folks will do three to five percent, if they're using just hunting plots, or they'll put up to 10 percent if they're using hunting plots and what people call nighttime plots or congregation plots or destination plots. So you decide how much total acreage you're going to devote to food plots.

The next thing is, and this is the next step for a number of reasons, the next step is to decide on what forage you're going to put in each plot. That's the second formula. Generally speaking, we like to see people put 60 to 75 percent of their total plot acreage that they've devoted to plots in perennial forages, which are forages that are designed to last more than a calendar year. Then put the rest in spring and summer, or fall and winter annuals, which are designed to last for part of a calendar year.

The reason you want to go ahead and do that and decide what you're going to plant where is so that you want to be able to do your soil tests next, and you want to go to a laboratory soil test and tell the lab what you're going to be planting in each plot. The reason for that is only a laboratory can tell you exactly how much, if any, lime you need to add to that plot, and exactly how much fertilizer and exactly what blend you need to put on for that particular forage.

That's the biggest money maker in food plotting is to spend the \$10 or so it costs to do a laboratory soil test because they can give you accurate, exact, readings of how much you need to put on and what to put on that's perfect, just enough for that forage, so that you don't go out and spend a couple of hundred bucks more than you needed to by trying to shot gun it.

But you need to choose the forage, decide on the forage plot first. Then note that on the soil test admission form to the lab so they can advise you and give you exact recommendations.

Ralph: Again, where can you get soil tests done?

Jon: Oh, soil tests are widely available. What you want to do is make sure when you go in, that the place that's going to be testing it actually sends that soil off to a lab. We don't use the little cheap probes that you stick in the ground because sometimes they're not consistently accurate. But the main thing is they don't give you an exact reading, tell you exactly how much fertilizer and

lime to go buy. They can say if it's this pH, go buy this much lime, they just give you a general range.

But how much lime you actually need is going to depend in part on what type soil you've got. So it's not going to be exact reading, and many of them don't tell you anything about how much fertilizer you need.

It's going to be like \$10 to get a soil test. You can get them done, Whitetail Institute, we'll test for anything including our forages. You can get them done from county agents. Most farm supply stores, you can get it done that way. Ag universities and ag centers, they will usually send it off to a lab.

Ralph: OK. So after you've got the results back from the lab and you determine how much lime or fertilizer you need, what's the next step?

Jon: Once you have, and again, we've decided how much we're going to devote to plots, decided what we're going to put in each plot. We've chosen our forage for each plot, decided on it, gotten the soil test report back. The first thing you want to look at is your soil pH reading. Soil pH is the most critical thing that you can control to give you good success with the food plot. It's the most important thing short of sunlight and water. I guess I'm like most people, when I started out, if a plot didn't look real good, I'll throw some more fertilizer on it. Well, you're throwing your money down the drain if pH is not right because pH is just a measurement of how well a plant can get the nutrients out of the soil.

It's like you and I are plants, and we're sitting in front of a table, it's piled up with fertilizer. We want to eat this fertilizer. Soil pH is like wire in our jaws. The optimum range for most high quality deer forages is 6.5 to 7.5., that's a measure of the acidity of the soil. But if your number comes back lower than 6.5, then they're probably going to give you a recommendation of how much lime to add.

You need to disc that lime in thoroughly to get it to work quickly and efficiently. What happens is if you don't do that, it's like we're sitting here looking at all this food and we can't eat it because our jaws are wired shut.

You might start noticing that if you plant in pH that's a little bit low, forage might look fine, might not taste as good, because it's not getting all the nutrients it should. As you start to get lower and lower, you start to see things like slower growth, and then stunted growth, where it just comes up an inch or two and doesn't do much else. Because even though you're pouring the fertilizer to it, it can't get it.

I did a little test one time. We've got a lake here that they draw down every year, the power company. Just for fun, I went out and planted something in the part of the lakebed that was exposed during the spring and summer. I don't even remember what I planted, but it came up an inch, tuned red and died because the pH was in the fours, I think, really low. It couldn't get any nutrients.

But that's the next thing to do once you get your soil test done, your results back, check that pH reading. If it's below 6.5, look for a lime recommendation, add the lime, and disc it in. OK?

Ralph: OK.

Jon: Now if possible, you want to try and do that at least several months in advance of planting. We've all heard people say lime takes time to work. Well that's true, but it's not really accurate. The accurate statement is that lime takes time to complete its job, complete doing whatever it's going to do. When you disc that lime in, and you should disc the lime in or till it in and incorporate it with the soil, because it works in particle to particle contact. A piece of lime has got to touch a piece of dirt to neutralize it, and it's like mixing pancakes. If you put pancake mix in a bowl, and put water in it, and drag a spoon through it once, it's not mixed real well.

You want to stir it into the soil real well. I usually disc it in from a couple of different directions, get it really mixed on well. When you do that, you're going to have an immediate jump in pH part of the way. But, then pH will continue to rise as the lime keeps working, but the rate at which the pH goes up from that point on gets slower and slower and slower. So you want to try to work it in a few months in advance if you can.

So that's the next step. You've got decide how much to put in plots, decide what to put in each plot, do your soil test, and then disc in your lime.

Ralph: And what is the next step then, choosing seeds?

Jon: OK, well no, you've chosen seed before you did the soil test. You've already decided what you're going to put in there. Let's say you're going to be planting in the fall, let me see if I can line this up for you. Let's say you're going to be planting a perennial in the fall. You go OK, I just got this piece of property that Ed McMahon came to my house and gave me this big check and I bought this piece of property, OK? I've decided how much of the total property I'm going to put in plots. I've decided how much I'm going to put in perennials and how much in annuals. I've done my soil tests. I've gotten my reports back. I've right away checked the pH reading, and whoops, it's a little bit low. I added lime as needed to all the plots and disked it in, all right?

Let's say you're more diligent than I usually am and get that done by May or June. Now, the next thing you want to do is look forward. You've gotten your spring work done. Let's look forward, and let's say we're planning on planting on Labor Day, September 1st, all right?

Ralph: OK.

Jon: What are you going to do between now and Labor Day? A couple of things you can do. One thing you can do is do nothing. And that's fine too, because either way we're going to tackle something a little bit later. Also, one thing you can do is anytime you plant fallow ground, you're going to have millions of dormant weed seeds in the ground. Dr. Carol Johnson is our weed herbicide scientist for the institute, and he's got an article he's written, it's on the website. It talks about which came first, the weed or the seed?

What's happened is that over time, you've got so many of these weed seeds that have built up in the ground, and so what you can do if you want is start disking the soil, or tilling it, every couple of weeks, maybe two or three times. Do it at strict two week intervals. This is during the spring and summer when the weeds will be growing.

What you'll do is you disc to the same depth at which you disked in your lime, because you don't want to dilute it with more dirt. Disc to the same depth each time, and you'll pull up some of that weed seed, and then it will germinate and start to grow.

Within two weeks, whatever is going to germinate will probably have germinated. It will be growing, but it will be too early for it to have gotten mature enough to make its own seeds yet. You come back and disk it again, you kill it. You bring up more junk. Wait two more weeks, do it again.

After you've done that two, three times probably is plenty. You'll all of a sudden notice that that plot is not greening up like it was. That means you've gotten a lot of that junk seed out of the ground, out of the growing area of the seedbed.

Now, this is what I normally do because we've got so much junk in the soil down here that I know if I plant, I'm going to have grass and weeds and all kind of crap come up. So I do that, and then I wait until one month before I'm going to plant, and that would be August 1st if we're assuming we plant September 1st. Come in right then, and now I'm thinking ahead to preparing my seedbed.

I've already gotten pH adjusted earlier. So now, I want to make sure it's at proper smoothness and that it's clean. So what I'll do is I'll come in and disc it or till it one more time about a month before I'm going to plant. I'm going to immediately smooth the plot out like I'm going to plant, finish the seedbed. But I don't plant it yet.

I'll wait a couple of weeks, and then if I have any more junk, any more junk weeds that have started to grow, or grass - grass is very hard to kill by disking because it grows from a root system -I let that junk start coming up for two weeks, and then I go in and spray it with a glyphosate herbicide, and I don't turn the soil again. You kill off whatever you brought up.

Then by the time you get to your planting dates, two weeks later, look where you are. Your pH is where it's supposed to be. Your seedbed is at proper firmness, which is you should be able to walk out in the plot and have your boot track sink down maybe a half an inch to an inch, and there's no junk on top. Without forages except for, I think, one we've got for fall, all you do is you put your fertilizer out, put your seed out, and go to the house.

Ralph: OK, so it's all about preparation?

Jon: Preparation, yes it is. With regard to soil pH, preparation is critical. With regard to the other steps, about getting weeds and grass under control, it's not as critical. But if you do that, it will make it a lot easier to maintain that forage in the spring, when you have to look at spring and mowing.

Ralph: OK. Speaking of all that stuff, what type of machinery is needed to accomplish these tasks?

Jon: You can do it with next to nothing to big-time machinery. The only thing different is going to be how hard it is and how much time it takes. I do all my little stuff and for my buddies, I do it with an ATV. I don't even own a tractor. You know if you've got a tractor and all that sort of equipment, you can just get stuff knocked out a lot more quickly. If you've got an ATV, you can get equipment that will do everything that you need it to do. I'm 50-something years old, about to

be 52, I don't much like getting out and just killing myself all day long, but I can do it with an ATV no problem.

You can also do it with simple hand tools. But I'm not one to be going out there with a little hand tiller and tilling an acre seed bed, I think I'd drop dead after the first 15 minutes, but it can be done. The difference is going to be in how much time it takes and the labor involved. Again, if you don't want to do all that, you can make extremely good plots by just getting them cleaned off and going with something like our No Plow or our Secret Spot Bloom.

Ralph: What are some of the no plow options, as far as how, what do they mean by no plow?

Jon: Well no plow is actually, it's a product name we've got. People call them no till forages, which basically means things that you don't have to dig up the dirt and prepare a seedbed to plant. There are lots of things that you can get, like rye grass, you know you can throw it out and it'll about grow on the rocks, not extremely attractive to deer, but it is somewhat attractive to them. Our No Plow and Secret Spot Blends are similar in that they can be planted without ground tillage. They have forage greens and grasses, they also have some canola in them and some annual clovers. I probably use more of the no plow than anything else we've got.

But the way it works is, it's all designed for a purpose. You've got the forage greens and grasses that come up first, the deer hit them. In the fall, let's say you plant in the fall, then the annual clovers start coming on, it's very quick. It's like bam, bam, bam. They'll hit those.

Then during the later season, you've got the brasiccas. Then when you get back around to that dead time between late winter and spring green up, which is one of the most critical times for deer to have access to good nutrition and also one of the times when there's very little palatable to them, if anything in the woods to eat, those annual clovers are back stoking them up. Boy, I'm telling you, that's important for antler growth.

If you think about it, deer are always either recovering from something or they're getting their body's ready to do something.

Ralph: Yeah.

Jon: Building antlers, and this is a little bit of a tangent, but building antlers is referred to as a secondary sex characteristic, which means that it is a sex characteristic of males that is secondary to something else and that something else is getting his body back in shape. The rut down here in Alabama is end of January, early February, in there, but when he's coming off of winter, he's going to get his body back in shape before he starts devoting as much of his nutritional resources as he can to antler growth.

So the better you can keep him in shape, and the sooner you can get him back in shape after the rut of winter, the sooner he can turn to antler growth in earnest and make more effective use of the antler growing window.

Ralph: OK. Then, to make the most of your food plot, probably requires quite a bit of maintenance.

Jon: Actually, you'd be surprised. It really doesn't. It really doesn't. For a perennial forage, which is one that lasts more than a year, you do have to do a little maintenance. It's like, you know, if you buy a car, you've got to change the oil once in awhile.

Ralph: Yeah.

Jon: It's not hard. Really all it involves, grass control is your number one perennial maintenance priority. You need to do that with a selective herbicide like our Arrest grass herbicide because, again, mowing won't knock grass down as well as the herbicides will because they tend to grow from a root system. The second thing is just mowing the plot, just topping it out, shaving the top, maybe a few times in the spring, once in the fall to do two things, to stimulate lower growth, and also to keep the forage and any annual upright weeds that you have from having a chance to flower and make seeds. So it's very simple. It doesn't take much work.

Ralph: OK. Should it ever be sprayed with a pesticide?

Jon: Yes, yes. There are two times you might want to use a herbicide, you might want to use one before you plant and you might want to use one after you plant. The one that you would use before you plant is what we all think of as Roundup, OK. Roundup is a brand name, but the actual herbicide in it is called glyphosate, and most folks just refer to that as gly. When you go to buy a herbicide for seedbed preparation, which you don't have to do except if you've got a lot of weeds and grass. Like I said, I like to spray my seedbeds a couple of weeks before I plant to not get anything that's growing.

What you want to do is don't go to a home store, go to someplace like, go to the good old farm supply store. Don't look at the name, Roundup for instance is a brand, what you want to do is go and look at the active ingredient label. What you're looking for there is two things. You want the only active ingredient in the product to be glyphosate and you want it to be at a high strength, in the 40, 50 percents, in there.

You can go get some products and the only active ingredient is glyphosate, but it may be only 18 percent. That's not very strong. So if you go to a farm supply store you'll have an excellent chance of getting a good strong gly in a Roundup brand.

We usually have some generics that will do well too, just whatever you want to use will be fine. But that is a non-selective herbicide that should kill or at least damage everything it touches.

Now, once you have perennial forage growing, then if you want to use a herbicide it would be referred to as a selective herbicide. Selective means that it hurts some stuff and it doesn't hurt other stuff.

You want to check the label and make sure of two things. Number one that it won't hurt the forage plants that you're going to be spraying it on and number two that it will control the weeds that you have, which means you need to know what those weeds are. You can identify them, county agent can tell you, farm supply store can usually tell you, you can find it on the web. Then you want to follow your label directions.

We have two. Generally, the ones you find are going to be either for grass or for broad leaf weeds. Our Arrest herbicide is for grass and the Slay herbicide is for broad leaf weeds. You need to be very careful about what you do and don't spray them on.

Arrest will control most kinds of grass, won't control all of them but almost all of them, and you can spray it at any of our perennial forage plants. The Slay herbicide for broad leafs is for use in clover and alfalfa. You could use it in Imperial White Tail clover, but you wouldn't want to use it on any of our other forage products because it might damage part of the win, so, that's the answer to the question.

Use a 40 to 50 percent strength gly herbicide, which is a non-selective herbicide if you need one during seedbed prep. To maintain your forages, you definitely want to get... If you've got grass you want to spray that grass out of there, again, that's your number one maintenance priority to do that in the spring, when it first starts actively growing.

Then, if you need to, you can also spray the broad leaf herbicide. Again, if it's appropriate for that forage and it will control the weeds that you have. But a lot of the weeds we face, if you'll just go in there and keep the tops of that plot just lopped off an inch or two, keep them about, you know, six, eight inches during the spring and don't mow when it's real hot or droughty in the summer, but in the fall, if you can keep them from re-seeding. A lot of times, you'll break that re-seeding cycle and then it may not be immediate, but in a year or two, you may notice they're not coming up like they were.

Ralph: OK. If, for some reason, the food plot is not growing the way it should, is there any way to, you know revamp them or enhance them any?

Jon: Sure. Well the first thing is to figure out why. Again, one thing goes back to selecting a forage for each site. There's a certain process that you go by deciding what you're going to put in each site. Our forage products are designed for circumstances, I guess that's the way I could put it. They're designed for, like let's say you've got a certain type soil, a certain type slope, you can or can't get in with equipment to give you the best, the best possible production that you could have in that environment.

To get an idea of how to go through to decide what forage you have, there's an article, a little article that I did, that's on our website that will show you the mental process that I use when I go through to decide what forage I'm going to put in a particular plot.

Folks will go to our website, which is www.whitetailinstitute.com, and when that page loads just scroll all the way down to the bottom of the page to the little arrows on the right, just go down to the bottom of that page, and you'll see a yellow block across the bottom of the page down there and in there, there's a link that says something like "hot article, " "How to Select a Forage for Each Site," something like that.

But that's the article I'm talking about. And that will give you an idea of the process that you go through in looking at a particular plot and pointing at it and saying, "What do I put in that piece of dirt right there?" And that will lead you through the process.

Ralph: OK. What are some of the biggest mistakes that people make when starting a new plot?

Jon: Some of the biggest mistakes are not... I guess the biggest mistakes are not choosing the right forage for the site. For instance, let's say you're looking at Imperial Whitetail Clover or our Imperial Whitetail Extreme. Let's say you're looking at plot that's good and moist. Moist bottomland that stays moist a good bit. And you go out there...

Here's one. Here's one I'll give you. Our Imperial Whitetail Extreme is a perennial blend that is designed to tolerate very low pH, as low as 5.4. Now I say tolerate. It'll do fine on that, but it'll do even better if it's where it should be at 6.5 to 7.5. But let's say you go out there and you have a nice piece of juicy, moist bottomland that stays moist a good bit, and your pH is 5.8. Any you're going, "I don't want to lime. I'm just gonna put Extreme in here because the pH is low and let it go."

Well, no. You can't do that. You go back to that article. You have to look through and get the right forage for the site. And Extreme does not like moist environments. It likes to be in a well-drained situation. So, the biggest mistake would be to try to cut corners in that kind of thing.

Remember, I talked about the instructions that we have on our forage blends, and I'm sure most other manufacturers do too. You know, we keep them to a minimum, but every step on there's important, and if you cut one, and you don't go step by step, you'll shoot yourself in the foot.

So the first thing is not choosing the right forage for the right site. And the second thing is not following the planting instructions which are almost always going to be easy, but every step is important.

Ralph: OK. And along those same lines, what's the most important tip you can give somebody?

Jon: The most important tip I could give somebody is do a laboratory soil test and check your soil pH through a lab, and if your soil pH is low, add your lime and disc it in a few months in advance if possible. That again is the most important thing that you can control to assure food plot success. And if your pH is low, you can plant it. You can fertilize it, and it's not going to help because the plants are not going to get the fertilizer. And that's the biggest tip I can give you.

The second biggest tip is if you are planting a perennial, start and make sure that you're timely with your grass control in the Spring because grass will eat you up! You've got to get control of it, and it's not hard to do, but you need to timely. I tell folks, these arrest herbicides, the grass herbicides like that, they're referred to in the industry as small weed herbicides. Which means that they work best at controlling seedling grasses and weeds. And by seedling with the grass, what I mean is a grass that hasn't had a chance to mature its root ball yet, which it'll usually do when it's 6 to 12 inches tall. This is the optimum window for spraying it. And that is when it is in seedling stage. You can usually get it after that, but it's going to be more expensive. It may take you multiple applications.

The beginning of that window is, I tell people, watch your lawn. You know how your lawn will sort of green up in the Spring, and it'll just sort of sit there. But then after a couple weeks it'll start really growing about the time you're going, "Oh. I wonder if my lawn mower is going to start." That's the beginning of that window. When the grass is actively growing, you want to spray it between then, and possible, before it gets 6 to 12 inches tall.

If you don't spray one year and it comes back the next year, you're still dealing with a mature grass because it's growing from a matured root ball.

Those are the two most important things, soil pH in planting and grass control for perennial maintenance. Those are the two biggies.

Ralph: OK. Jon, it's been a pleasure talking to you today. I really...

Jon: Me too! I really enjoyed it. I hope I haven't rambled on too much. You can tell I love this stuff. (Laughter)

Ralph: Listen. I've learned so much just from listening to your advice and the whole process of it. You know, a lot of things I never thought of before.

Jon: Well good. Listen. I'll tell you seriously, you know, anybody can call us. We've got in-house consultants who here to answer questions and that's one of our big deals. We try to really have somebody, a person answer the phone when people call. They can reach us at 800-688-3030 extension 2. And somebody will answer your call in a timely manner and it'll be somebody who cares about what you're worried about, and they'll know what they're talking about. So, even if they're not our customers, if they've got a question, tell them to please feel free to call us.

Ralph: OK. And that website is www.WhitetailInstitute.com?

Jon: Correct. And the consultant line 800-688-3030 extension 2.

Ralph: OK. Thanks again, Jon.

Ralph: OK. Thank you very much!

Ralph: And thank you to all the folks who have been listening in to this installment of Trophy Buck Secrets' teleseminar series. I'm Ralph Scherder, and now I'm going to turn the reins over to Dave Barrett, founder of Trophy Buck Secrets. Dave.

Dave: Thanks Ralph, and thank you, Jon. That was fantastic stuff! Well, I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. I can't wait for the next call. Well, in the mean time, what you need to do now is visit <u>TrophyBuckSecrets.com</u>. Thanks again for being here, and I look forward to talking with you again soon. Good-bye.

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