



How to Plant a Food Plot - 10 Step Guide for Beginners

Equipment - Site - Soil - Prepare - Plant - Protect

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Step 1: Equipment

Tools you use can range from a garden tiller at one end to a 40-50 HP tractor at the other extreme. ATVs fill in a strong spot between these two, allowing you to work a much larger area than the tiller would, but not quite as well as with a tractor.

If you're just starting out, a tractor in the 21-30 HP range is a good choice. Of course if you can afford it and are going to be planting 10-20 acres of plots every year, moving up to a 40-50 HP machine is definitely a good idea.

Implements you will need include a tiller or disc to work the soil and mower to control weeds and initiate fresh tender regrowth of clover and alfalfa. A cultipacker or drag harrow is also good to have, but not absolutely essential. These items are available for both small tractors and ATVs.

A pull-behind or mounted spreader is a time-saver, but you can also just dispense seeds with a hand-crank spreader. Finally, you'll need a sprayer to apply herbicide and keep your plots as weed-free as possible. This can be a hand-held sprayer, pull-behind model, or PTO-driven version for a tractor.

➔ **Extra Tip:** *Whatever tractor you buy, make sure it's 4wd. If not you may find yourself bogged down and out of action when you come upon muddy or slippery ground.*

Step 2: Choosing the Site

Once you've researched and settled on some basic food plot equipment, the next step is choosing the site for your plots. This is extremely important. Poor site selection can doom your food plot from the start.

Don't choose ground that is rocky, uneven, or has lots of stumps or trees growing in it. Select open or partially open areas that receive at least six hours of sunlight a day. Eight to ten hours is better still.

Old logging roads and landings in woods, overgrown fields, unused corners or edges on farms, and natural clearings in forests all offer possible sites.

Don't be overly concerned about the shape of the plot. It doesn't have to be a perfect square or rectangle. Curved edges are fine. Deer tend to follow the natural contours of the land as they move anyway.

Besides these basics, consult your county's agriculture maps to find areas with the best soil when possible. If you only have a few options, you'll simply have to grow the plots where you can and skip this step.

➔ **Extra Tip:** *Avoid areas visible from roads or the neighbor's property. This may tempt people if they see good buck in the plots. And the vehicle activity and visibility will discourage older bucks from using the plots except at night.*



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Step 3: Location and Size of Your Food Plot

Try to find areas to put plots in along a deer's typical travel corridor. This will usually be a route from daytime bedding areas to larger evening feeding spots in agricultural fields, creek bottoms, or orchards. These will be your hunting food plots.

Locate them along these travel routes so the deer will be tempted to use them on their way to the major evening feeding areas. But don't put them too close to suspected bedding locations or you may not be able to approach the plots and hunt them without spooking the deer.

This is a mistake many novices make. Stay a few hundred yards from suspected bedding areas.

Be sure to keep in mind prevailing winds as you plan out your plots. You need to be able to reach your stand location without spooking the quarry or having your scent blow towards the site.

Also plant a few plots in more open areas strictly for nutrition. These should be spots you don't intend to hunt. These are great locations for nourishing the herd and getting trail camera images. You can hunt trails back in the woods leading to these plots, but never hunt right over them or you'll defeat their purpose.

Smaller hunting food plots closer to bedding areas should typically be 1/4-1/2 acre and long and narrow in shape. That way a buck will feel comfortable knowing he can jump quickly into escape cover on either side with a few quick bounds. And most animals you see will be in shooting range or close to it. Nutrition plots can be larger-- up to several acres--and shape isn't as important.

➔ **Extra Tip:** Besides prevailing winds, also consider sun direction when laying out hunting plots. The goal should be not to be staring into a glaring sun during late afternoon hunts.

Once you've decided to grow food plots, purchased necessary equipment and chosen some optimum sites, it's time for preparing the site, killing weeds, fertilizing and liming, working the soil, choosing seeds, and planting.

Step 4: Clear the Site and Kill Weeds

First off, you'll probably need to clear some brush, rocks, and maybe a few stumps or logs. Hopefully the site isn't too rough or covered with trees. If it is, you may need to hire a dozer operator for this work. If not you can simply use the equipment you have to remove all logs, branches, stones, and bushes.

Next you'll need to spray weeds and grasses that are likely growing on the site. Roundup or generic [glyphosate](#) is the best non-selective herbicide for this and will kill most vegetation. Spray on a calm day with no rain predicted for a few hours, or hire your local farm co-op to spray it for you.

➔ **Extra Tip:** Wait 10 days after spraying with herbicide. If a significant amount of green is still visible, spray again. Not killing weeds thoroughly enough is one of the most common causes of food plot failures.



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Step 5: Test the Soil and Add Fertilizer and Lime

At this point you should pause in your preparation to do a soil test. Dig up a few dirt samples from several areas down to about 6-10 inches and mix them up. Collect separate samples for each plot site, unless they're located close together. Send them off using places like farm cooperatives, county extension agents, and agricultural colleges, or use mail-in kits from the [Whitetail Institute](#).

You'll get results back in a few days that will tell you how much nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium you need according to the N-P-K readings. The test will also tell you whether you need sulfur, or perhaps small amounts of micronutrients such as boron, manganese, or zinc. A fertilizer company or farm co-op can mix up bags to suit your specific soil needs.

The soil test will also tell you how much (if any) lime you need based on the pH reading. Try to get this up in the 6-7 range. Apply lime as dictated by the soil test or have a fertilizer company do it when they apply needed nutrients.

Having a good pH reading and the proper levels of fertilizers is vital for obtaining the best food plot possible. Without them, crucial nutrients will remain chemically "bound" in the soil and not be available to the plants you are growing. They'll grow poorly and won't produce as much forage as they could in properly balanced soil.

➔ **Extra Tip:** *If you decide to skip the soil test (bad decision), at least add lime at about 1-2 tons per acre and apply a 5-10-10 or similar fertilizer to the soil.*

Step 6: Working the Earth

Once you've cleared the site, thoroughly killed the weeds and grasses present, and added needed lime and fertilizer, it's time to till the soil. This will loosen it, mix in the lime and fertilizer, and kill most remaining weed seeds starting to pop up.

You can use a plow, disk, or tiller for this. Work the soil, wait a few days, and then work it again until you get a firm smooth seedbed with no large clumps. Remove any rocks you encounter.

➔ **Extra Tip:** *If the soil is wet and gums up, stop tilling. Wait for it to dry out until it's easily worked and falls loosely through the hands when you crumple it.*



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Step 7: Prepare the Seed Bed

For small seeds, cultipacking or firming the soil is good before planting. These include seeds such as clover, alfalfa, chicory, and [brassica vegetables](#). For larger seeds such as soybeans and lablab, this step isn't necessary. Use a drag harrow, cultipacker, or drive over the plot with the ATV or tractor to firm the bed before planting.

➔ **Extra Tip:** *You can cultipack again after planting for even better soil-seed contact, but this step isn't necessary if you time your planting just before precipitation is called for. The rain will firm the seeds into the prepared bed.*

Step 8: What to Plant

What exactly you should plant varies with the time of year. In spring, you can plant perennials such as alfalfa, clover and chicory. These can also be planted successfully in fall.

During late spring and summer, warm season annuals are the best bet. These include lablab, cowpeas, soybeans, and Sunn hemp.

In late summer and early fall, cereal grains and brassicas need to go in the ground. These can include wheat, oats, triticale, and rye in the grain category and brassicas such as rape, kale, turnips, beets, and radishes.

➔ **Extra Tip:** *Mixtures made by the major wildlife seed companies and available through Bass Pro Shops are often your best bet. The variety of plants included makes it likely that at least a few will do very well in your soils. It also ensures that some plants will always be at prime nutrition and palatability stage as they mature at different speeds.*

Step 9: Sow the Seed

Pay careful instructions to each seed label to get the seeds planted at just the proper depth. This means 1/8-1/4 inch for small seeds like clover, brassicas, and chicory, 1/2 to 1 inch for larger seeds like cowpeas, lablab, and soybeans.

Also be sure to follow recommended seed amounts for the size food plot you have. These will usually be given as pounds per acre. This may be as little as 4-8 pounds for small seeds such as clover or brassicas to as much as 50-75 pounds per acre for large seeds such as soybeans or lablab. Plant too few and you'll have a spotty, light crop. Put in too many and you'll have too many plants and they'll be stunted and grow poorly.

➔ **Extra Tip:** *Be especially careful not to put out too much brassica seed. These plants need some space between them and won't thrive if they are crowded.*



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Step 10: Protect Your Food Plot from Grazing Pressure

You might have trouble certain times of the year with deer eating the crop before it grows big enough to withstand the grazing pressure. The plants need to thrive if they are to feed deer throughout the late winter.

You can plant several plots that mature at different times so the deer aren't consuming one plot. Another solution to prevent early crop damage is to use a high fence, electric fence or by using a deer repellent system such as Plotsaver, from Messina Wildlife.

➔ **Extra Tip:** *Some seed blends like [Mossy Oak BioLogic](#) have a variety of plants in them that mature at different rates, giving you huge amounts of forage production and constant food source for deer.*

With this step-by-step guide, you should be well on your way to successfully growing food plots that will not only help the deer and other wildlife on lands you own or manage, but also improve the quality of your hunting.

Any way you look at it, that's a win-win proposition.