



Your Side of the Fence

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Grow Your Deer Herd with the Right Ingredients

By Erik Bartholomew, Big Game Biologist



I often get phone calls from landowners asking what crops they need to plant for deer. I follow up with a series of questions related to

their location and what they are hoping to accomplish with a food plot. After answering their questions, I take the opportunity to talk about foods deer are likely already eating on their property.

If you think about it, deer have survived without food plots for years. Primarily browsers, deer prefer eating woody stems, leaves, vines and forbs rather than grasses. Increasing the availability of these foods year-round will make your property more attractive to deer while maintaining a healthier herd. One way to do this is by planting native trees and shrubs. These plants are adapted to the weather conditions in our region and are less likely to become invasive and overtake the property.

Native trees and shrubs not only have woody stems and buds deer like to browse on, but also produce nutritious fruits. Some fruits,

like persimmons, have a soft skin that breaks down quickly and is only available to wildlife for a short period of time. These fruits are known as soft mast. Other fruits, like acorns, have a hard shell that allows the fruit to last longer in the environment and are known as hard mast.

Persimmons, Plums and Pears

If you're considering planting soft mast trees to attract deer, you can't beat persimmons. They do well in Oklahoma and the fruits ripen just in time for archery season. Persimmon trees can produce fruit in just a few years and once established can become reliable producers. Stems from female plants can even be easily grafted onto male trees to increase fruit production. Learn more about persimmons, including grafting

techniques, by visiting the Quality Deer Management Association webpage, www.qdma.com.

Beyond persimmons, blackberries, mulberries, sand and Chickasaw plums are delicacies for deer. Since they don't produce fruit during hunting season, their importance in a balanced deer diet is often overlooked. These plants provide more than food for deer; berries and plums make tasty jams and jellies, or can be enjoyed by the handful!

From a hunting perspective, the old standby is to find a homestead that still has apple and pear trees and hang a stand nearby. Though these trees aren't native, neither are they invasive. Apples and pears are a nutritious fruit, and the trees won't take over your property.



Rich Fuller/ODWC

Persimmons provide deer with a reliable, nutritious treat, just in time for hunting season.

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Landowner Assistance Contacts:

Doug Schoeling.....(405) 590-2584
RosaLee Walker..... (918) 607-1518
Matt Fullerton..... (580) 571-5820

Deer Management Assistance Program:

Erik Bartholomew..... (405) 396-2503

Okla. Wildscape Certification Program:

Melynda Hickman..... (405) 990-4977

Streams Management:

NE Region - Jim Burroughs.. (918) 683-1031
SE Region - Don Groom..... (918) 297-0153
W Region - Jim Burroughs.... (918) 683-1031

Farm Pond Technical Assistance; Farm Pond Fish Stocking Program:

NW Region - Chas Patterson(580) 474-2668
SW Region - Ryan Ryswyk.... (580) 529-2795
NE Region - Josh Johnston... (918) 346-3220
EC Region - Jim Burroughs.. (918) 683-1031
SE Region - Don Groom..... (918) 297-0153
SC Region - Matt Mauck..... (580) 924-4087
C Region - Keith Thomas..... (405) 325-7288

Other ODWC Contacts:

Operation Game Thief..... (800) 522-8039
License Section..... (405) 521-3852
Website..... wildlifedepartment.com

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Jena Donnell..... (405) 496-0350
jena.donnell@odwc.ok.gov
or
Doug Schoeling..... (405) 590-2584
doug.schoeling@odwc.ok.gov

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Acorns are an important fall and winter ingredient of white-tailed deer management.

The Mighty Acorn

In terms of deer food, oaks are the primary hard mast-producing species in Oklahoma. While pecans and hickories are great for squirrels and humans, deer aren't particularly fond of them. (Though smoking a venison shoulder over either is quite delicious!)

Oaks come in two varieties: white oaks and red oaks. Post, bur and chinquapin oak are members of the white oak division. They have rounded lobes and their veins do not extend past the leaf margins. Shumard's, red and black oak are members of the red oak division. These trees have veins that extend beyond the leaf margins to form bristles or "whiskers." White and red oaks also vary in acorn development. White oaks produce acorns in six months while red oak acorns take 18 months to mature.

Which oak variety do deer prefer? While deer will eat both varieties, white oak acorns contain fewer tannins, making them tastier and more digestible. Does that mean you should cut down all of the bad-tasting red oaks? Of course not! Red oak acorns still make a great deer food. Their higher tannin content may make them more bitter, but they last longer than white oak acorns. As fall and winter wear on, snow and rain leaches the tannins from red oak acorns, and deer find them more palatable. White and red oaks are equally important because of this difference in acorn lifespan and the annual variability in acorn production.



When oak trees are too crowded, they won't get enough food, water and sunlight to produce to their full potential. One way to improve future acorn crops is to thin the competition. First, find out which trees are the best producers by surveying individual trees with binoculars in late summer before acorns begin dropping. Keep track of which trees have the most acorns growing on the branches. It is best to do this survey over a three-year period to account for weather-related variability. Then remove trees from around the elite trees. Opening the canopy has a secondary benefit; it lets more sunlight reach the ground, allowing forbs and other plants deer browse on to grow.

Before deciding which type of trees or shrubs to plant, take stock of your property. If you have plenty of oaks, but not many soft mast producing plants, planting sand plum, blackberries or persimmons may be the way to go. If you have plenty of sand plum thickets, but not much in the way of hard mast, oaks may be the best choice. They may not produce for several years, but you will be making a solid investment in your deer herd and future hunts.