



The Food Plot Doctor

J. Wayne Fears

Food Plots in Pine Plantations – 7 Simple Steps

What can we grow in the shade of our pine plantation to attract deer?

Pine plantations, fruit orchards, nut orchards, Christmas tree plantations, firebreaks, old logging roads and many more areas in rural America offer opportunities to plant narrow food plots, provided the right crop is planted – one that is favored by deer and which can flourish in partial shade. There is a lot of interest in planting shady lanes for deer food plots, and we are going to take a look, somewhat in detail, at how to plant perennial food plots in maturing pine plantations. Simply by eliminating steps one and two below, this same method will work on most narrow openings in woodlands where shade can be a problem.

Planting the Harvested Row of a Pine Plantation

In the southern half of the U.S., thousands of acres of cropland have been converted into pine plantations since the advent of the Conservation Reserve Program in the 1985 farm bill. Today many of those pine plantations are ready for their first thinning. This is commonly done by cutting the 3rd, 4th, or 5th row, usually the 5th row. This opening thins the plantation and also gives the timber cutter access into the plantation for his timber harvesting equipment.

The removal of the 5th row of trees opens up 20% of the pine forest to sunlight or partial sunlight, and this strip of open land can quickly become overgrown with sweetgum, privet, goldenrod, ironweed, and other low value vegetation if a management program of some type is not started. If deer management is your land use priority, then this newly opened strip is a great opportunity for a perennial food plot.

The following perennial food plot system combines recommended “best management practices” for pine production, including thinning, prescribed burning, and chemical vegetation control with strip disking, and inter-planting food plots.

Establishing the Shade Tolerant Food Plot

Step 1. Once the row of trees has been removed to achieve thinning, get control of weed and sapling growth before it becomes a problem. This is best done by getting in contact with your county agricultural agent for herbicide recommendations, and employing a qualified person to help you spray the openings with a herbicide such as Arsenal or Chopper to kill undesirable plant species.

Step 2. Follow the herbicide treatment with a controlled burn during cool weather, usually February in many states. *Be sure to have your state forestry agency help you with this burn as many restrictions apply and a trained, controlled burning manager is required.*

Step 3. The second year after the thinning, when most of the debris has rotted or been burned, you are ready to prepare a seedbed and plant a proven shade tolerant crop to establish the food plot. Research done in pine plantations indicates that Durana clover is an ideal deer food plot crop due to its shade tolerance, wide adaptability to weather extremes, low maintenance, high protein content (up to 28%), and long life – 7 years or more with proper management.

Step 4. Plan on planting Durana in September or October for a fall planting in the South, or in March or April in the spring. In the North, plant for fall in August or September, or for spring in April or May. In areas where harsh winter weather can damage young clover seedlings, plant after the danger of a hard freeze has passed.



Step 5. Soil test and fertilize according to the test results, aiming for a pH of 6.0.

Step 6. Disk the ground 6 inches deep and prepare a smooth seedbed. Plant 5 pounds of Durana seed per acre at no more than 1/8-inch deep; then, cultipack the seedbed. Pre-inoculated Durana seed is not inexpensive, at anywhere from \$4 to \$6 per pound, but remember it is a long lasting perennial.

Step 7. Management of Durana is easy but necessary to get years of sustained yield. Depending on weed coverage, mow the food plot down to 5 inches, one to three times each summer. Do not mow if your area is in a drought. Fertilize once every

year, in early fall, according to soil test, or with 350 pounds of 0-20-20 fertilizer per acre.

Deer will find the thick understory of the unthinned rows of pine trees good cover, and even good bedding. To feed, all they have to do is to step out of the cover and into the food plot strip where the 5th row once stood. Also, the clover-covered strips offer other benefits for you, such as firebreaks, hiking trails, wild turkey feeding, wildlife viewing, and reduction of soil erosion.

Deer habitat researcher Bobby Watkins of Starkville, Mississippi, has gathered data that show this management system can increase deer carrying capacity as much as ten-fold, compared



Photo left: The first step to manage a 5th row food plot strip in a pine plantation is to use a controlled burn to get the strip back to bare earth for a good seedbed.
Photo above: Here is an example of just how well Durana will do in a shady 5th row situation.

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to an unmanaged pine plantation. The native plants established after thinning and burning provide food, bedding, and escape cover, while the Durana clover in the 5th row lanes add large amounts of high quality forage for deer.

Where Did Durana Come From?

Every time I discuss Durana clover at a deer management seminar or in an article, I get the question, "Where did Durana come from?"

Durana is a clover developed by the University of Georgia and AgResearch of New Zealand. It was developed as a grazing crop for cattle, and took years of research and tolerance studies to bring it to the Durana we know today.

Test plots of the new clover were planted in the late 1990s in Georgia. In 1998, tests were conducted during a severely dry late winter, spring, and summer. Researchers expected nothing to be left of the Durana test plots after the drought. In September that year, rain returned to the area and the Durana exploded. The plots recovered so well that they were grazed with cattle that fall. That was when the researchers knew they had a new clover that was special, both for cattle and deer. The test plot results, documented under drought conditions with fierce competition from weeds, Bermuda, and fescues, did

extremely well for the establishment and long-term management of food plots.

The food plot tests have reportedly attracted as many as 60 deer without any measurable grazing pressures. According to researchers, Durana will last three times longer than many other white clovers under continuous grazing, and heat and cold conditions. Plus it requires very little direct sunlight to thrive in wooded settings.

So whether your property has pine plantations, firebreaks, old logging roads, or other strip openings, consider this method of developing food plots in partial shade. In most cases you will not be disappointed if it is done correctly. 🦌

J. Wayne Fears, the Food Plot Doctor, is one of the pioneers who helped develop food plot practices that are common today. Now, his decades of experience are available to Whitetails Unlimited members. J. Wayne uses questions from our readers as the basis for his Food Plot Doctor columns. Just email your questions to foodplotdr@aim.com, or go to the Food Plot Doctor link on the WTU home page (www.whitetailsunlimited.com) and submit your question. The Food Plot Doctor columns will be archived on the WTU website, so you can go back to them for reference in the future.

Unfortunately, J. Wayne will not be able to respond to emails individually, but he will find common themes from your questions to write about. So get busy, find that thing that's been driving you crazy, or that one topic everyone else seems to have directly opposite opinions on, and let J. Wayne give you the straight scoop.

Send emails to: foodplotdr@aim.com