White-tailed deer hunters who own or lease land are always trying to increase their odds of tagging a trophy buck. But until now, there has been little comprehensive information on how to set up a property to improve the local deer herd and your overall hunting success.

The expert advice inside *White-tailed Deer Management and Habitat Improvement* will benefit properties of all sizes – from 10 to 1,000 acres or more. Plus, the majority of this work can be done on small properties with little more than an investment of time and sweat equity.

Steve Bartylla has more than 20 years of experience setting up and managing hunting properties, as well as consulting for other landowners who want to manage their lands for healthy, mature bucks. His hands-on knowledge will provide detailed instruction on how to boost your hunting success by improving the land, the quality of mature deer and your overall hunting plan.

**YOU’LL LEARN HOW TO:**
- Add and enhance food sources
- Create cover
- Influence deer movement
- Help doe populations
- Manage for older, larger bucks
- Hunt more often and decrease disturbances

Improve your deer hunting land now for bigger bucks!

Steve Bartylla is an accomplished trophy whitetail hunter and land manager from Wisconsin. His articles appear in *Deer & Deer Hunting* and other magazines, and his previous books include *Advanced Stand Hunting Strategies*, *Bowhunting Tactics that Deliver Trophies* and *Big Buck Secrets*. He is also the host of the online shows *Grow ’em Big* and *Hunt ’em Big*, and regularly appears on *Deer & Deer Hunting TV*. 
The most common question I get from clients is what should I plant? Every year, I experiment with new plantings. I also conduct the same field trials now as when I worked for a large seed company as a Plant Breeder’s Technician for three years.

Still, I keep coming back to these same plantings that have been my workhorses over and over again: soybeans, corn, a half and half mix of Antler King Trophy Clover and a grazing alfalfa, Antler King Honey Hole, and another blend of three parts cereal rye and one part oats. Add some apple trees and create some new browse with a chainsaw and you are pretty much covered.

I know the “cool” thing to do is come up with your own blends of seeds at the local co-op and not buy from food plot seed companies. The idea is that these seed companies simply mark up the prices of seeds you can buy yourself, without their help.

Here’s the thing that I learned from my Bachelor of Science degree in Biology and three years working for the seed company. If you buy any two different white clovers their traits will be different. Sure, they’re both white clovers, but each line of clover is bred for specific traits. One might be bred for long, tough stalk production to increase its value as a hay crop. Another can be bred for a frail, more highly digestible stalk for maximum nutritional content when used for grazing. Yet another could be bred for seed production, while yet another is bred for minimal seed production to shift more of its energy to pumping out forage. While one is geared more for handling droughts, another can be bred for a higher tolerance for surviving periods of standing water.

My point is that no two white clovers are the same, just like no two purple top turnips, dwarf essex rapes, alfalfas and so on are the same. They’re all bred for specific traits, and that greatly impacts how well they’ll grow in your conditions, as well as their desirability to deer.

What the better food plot seed companies do is test all sorts of seeds, trying to come up with the products that they believe will grow and attract deer better than one can create by chance at the local co-op and mixing the same categories of seeds yourself. Why? Because the specific seed lines the food plot seed companies select have the specific characteristics they have found are best for both growth and desirability to deer.

That’s a long version of explaining why I use Antler King’s Trophy Clover and Honey Hole products. I’ve yet to find any competitors’ blends or a mix that I’ve come up with on my own that can beat them in the desirability and growth factors I want for these plantings.

My motive, beside explaining why I’m not one of the “cool kids” when it comes to mixing my own seed blends, isn’t to convince you to buy Antler King products. No, my advice is to find what works best for you, for your particular growing conditions, in your specific area and run with it – whether it’s something you mix on your own, you buy from Antler King or some other food plot seed company.

When it comes to habitat improvement, there simply is no one-size-fits-all solution. Each manager has different goals, habitat types and a wide variety of soil types. Whether it’s the cool thing or not
when you find something that is consistently producing the results you want, keep experimenting with others and strive to improve, but also continue to use the plantings that consistently produce as your foundation on most of your plots.

What I’m doing here is merely explaining what works best for me. Take that for whatever it’s worth, but never let anyone convince you that you’re doing it “wrong,” as long as it is producing the results you want.

With that out of the way, let’s cover clover plantings:

Antler King Trophy Clover is always my primary workhorse. It simply produces a high tonnage yield of highly desirable, highly nutritious deer food. In states like Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, Ohio and others in that general latitude belt, it’s really a year-round food source, as it’s rarely covered in a couple feet of snow for more than a week. Deer eat it 365 days a year during many years and only miss a few weeks of it in heavy snow depth years.

My three primary plantings for clover: Traditional clover plots and staging/kill plots that are most often frost seeded after planting cereal rye and oats the previous fall. And also planted to ring the outer 10 yards along the tree lines of larger food plots, as it handles the shade better than the other plantings I rely on.

Tip: Clover is fantastic for absentee landowners because it takes so little effort to establish and maintain. Once it’s growing, mow it once or twice a year and spray once a year with a Clethodim-based herbi-
Antler King’s Trophy Clover is a real workhorse for producing high tonnage of forage through most of, if not the entire year.
cide to kill grasses if they start getting out of control. When that's required, spray in midsummer after a rain and a few weeks after a mowing so the grasses are reverted to a more immature, actively growing state to get the full potency of the herbicide.

**Tip:** Where alfalfa can grow on grounds in the southern half of the whitetail's range, that portion of a clover/alfalfa mix can help provide nutrition during the hot summer months when many clovers go dormant.

**Tip:** Clover frost seeds very well into last year's corn, soybeans, brassicas, cereal rye and oats.

### Next, let's cover corn and soybeans:

For as much as farm crops are often discounted as food plots, corn and soybeans can be great for drawing and holding deer, as well as for providing overwinter nutrition in areas with snow cover for significant portions of the winter. As a bonus, many habitat managers lease their farming rights out. It's actually quite easy to work with the farmer to leave crops where the manager requests and write it into the lease contract.

The bargain I strike on every contract I have control over is that I have the right to purchase any crops back from the farmer at input costs. For standing soybeans I pay $150 an acre. On corn, it's $300 an acre.

Frankly, those are great deals because it almost always takes more input costs per acre on 5 acres of crops than it does on 50 acres. At the same time, most crop farmers have better equipment than food plotters have access to. Finally, they rarely have to work their planting schedule around anywhere near as many obstacles as those managing their grounds for deer. For the managers, planting food plots is rarely the top priority in their lives. For crop farmers, getting crops in the ground at the right time and under the right conditions is the top priority of their business lives. Simply put, if managers can consistently produce grain crops that yield as well or better than a farmer that's leasing the farming rights, that farmer probably isn't going to be in business very long.

I have two primary uses for corn and soybeans: The first is to simply remove the desire of deer to leave my managed ground to get corn or soybeans on the neighbor's ground. One of the keys to getting deer to spend a majority of their time on your ground is to make sure the surrounding properties don't offer anything they want that they can't find on your land.

The other primary use is simply to offer a food source with solid drawing power that can also help supplement overwinter nutrition on properties in the northern half of the whitetail's range. I use timber work to supply a surplus of woody browse and cereal rye as my overwinter workhorses, as grain production costs are comparatively much higher. Still, having some grain crops to help fatten up deer as they enter winter sure doesn't hurt.

**Tip:** A great method for offering soybeans and corn each year, and influencing bucks to hit a plot even more consistently, is to split the larger plots in half—plant corn in one half and soybeans in the other. That offers more feeding options and allows you to rotate each half between the two, providing the ability to offer both in the same plot each year.

**Tip:** To really stretch a grain plot's food production out over the entire fall, winter and into spring, top seed the corn plots with a mix of three parts cereal rye and one part oats at 100 pounds per acre, right around the time the corn first starts turning yellow. You can do the same in the soybean plots, or you can also top seed them with brassicas at the same suggested planting rates as when planted alone, again top seeding when the leaves begin turning color. You can get away with top seeding brassicas into corn too, but both corn and most brassicas are nitrogen hogs, meaning you're likely to have to apply more nitrogen when planting brassicas or will get a very stunted crop. In either case, simply walk down the rows with a hand seeder, disperse the seeds onto the top of the soil and then pray for rain.

These top seedings reduce the feeding pressure on the corn and beans, which makes the grain last longer. The top seeding also increases the overall food production of the plot itself, offering more desirable foods well after the grains have been wiped out, further extending the time period that the plot is drawing deer.

**Tip:** Deer densities and available food levels are what dictate how large a corn or bean plot must be to withstand deer browse pressure. On properties that have five deer per square mile, a 1-acre grain plot is often sufficient. This allows corn and beans to be a valid option on larger staging/kill plots. When deer densities are 50 or more per square mile, anything less than a 4-acre grain plot is at a high risk of being wiped out before ever being able to produce any grain at all. Heck, I've had 8-acre plots wiped clean in two weeks in midsummer when deer numbers were stupid high.

**Tip:** Weeds can actually be your friends until soybeans reach 10 to 12 inches in height. So long as the weeds aren't completely choking the soybeans out, the weeds help protect the beans from deer browsing while they are at their most vulnerable state because the deer don't enjoy getting stuck in the face by weeds while eating. If you're planting Roundup Ready soybeans in areas where feeding pressure makes it difficult to establish a stand, prepare the seedbed in the traditional method, but put off the second spraying of a generic Roundup until the soybeans are in the 8- to 12-inch tall range.

**Tip:** One can establish both corn and soybeans without the use of a traditional planter. After the ground has been sufficiently disc'd, broadcast the seeds at 125 to 150 percent of the suggested rate and then set your disc to turn the top 2 inches of soil. Lightly disc the seeds in on one pass and pray for rain.

### Brassicas purposes for me:

Many view brassicas as a late-season attractant for the Midwest and points north. This is a good example that really shows how specific seed types can be bred...
Broadcasting cereal rye and oats between the rows of standing corn really increases the food production and desirability of corn plots.
for specific traits. The primary reason I’ve never been able to match or beat Antler King’s Honey Hole brassica blend is that it has two seed types that are highly attractive early season draws, as well as the traditional mid- to late-season brassicas. The result is a full season candy crop, and that’s one of my primary uses for brassicas. I want a planting that is highly attractive to deer from opening day to its close and beyond, if possible.

Brassicas are a planting I use to create staging/kill plots that really draw in deer, assuming the plot is open to receiving enough sunlight to thrive and is at least a half acre in size to allow a thriving brassica plot to establish itself.

The other reason I plant brassicas is to extend overwinter nutrition. By top seeding into grain crops I’m able offer feeding options to deer well into winter.

**Tip:** Though there are many different brassicas, few grow well when crowded. They need some “elbow room” to really pump out the best growth rates. Due to this, even though I exceed the suggested planting rates on many other plantings, I don’t on brassica plots.

**Tip:** To extend the life of brassica plots, as well as fill in the gaps where they just aren’t growing well, top seed them with a mix of three parts cereal rye and one part oats, at about 100 pounds per acre. Simply allow the brassicas to get around 4 inches tall or wait until about two months before the first frost typically hits before you disperse the cereal rye and oats seeds on top of the ground.

**Tip:** Since most brassicas germinate so easily, they are an ideal candidate for the “poor man’s no-till” planting method.

**Cereal rye and oats serve several vital purposes for me:**

The reason for mixing three parts cereal rye and one part oats is to better cover the early, mid- and late-season desirability factor. Fall planted oats are a solid draw for deer until a killing frost wipes them out. Cereal rye merely goes dormant when the ground freezes and is actively growing when the ground is thawed. So, it can resume growing during midwinter thaws and grow through the entire winter in southern states. That trait also allows cereal rye to be the very first growing vegetation in spring in the areas that experience frozen soils during winter. That instant shot of around a 15 percent protein content deer food can be extremely beneficial to deer that experience moderate to harsh winter conditions.

With that in mind, one should be able to guess that supplementing overwinter nutrition and providing the quickest possible spring growth are two of the vital purposes this mix serves for me. Simply put, it helps deer enter winter, endure winter and enter spring in better shape than without offering this mix.

Next, as neither requires a surplus of sun to grow, and both help build soil quality, I most often plant the cereal rye and oats the first year or two of a staging/kill plot’s existence. They grow well in those in-woods, partially shaded plots, improve the soil quality and help control weeds. In those settings I plant it at a rate of 150 to 200 pounds per acre.

As already discussed, I also top seed the mix at around 100 pounds per acre into corn, soybean and brassicas plots, to offer a 1-2-3 punch combination of deer foods, while also extending the life of those plots and supplementing fall, winter and spring nutritional levels.

**Tip:** This cereal rye and oats mix is a great tool for salvaging

Adding fruit trees to food plots gives deer one less reason to go elsewhere to feed. Just be sure to protect your apple trees from deer and rodent damage.
Creating water holes near your food plots and within shooting distance of stands increases the drawing power of the plots, as well as the odds of stands paying off.
failed and failing fall plots. Since soil temperatures merely have to be 33 degrees or warmer for the cereal rye to germinate and it can grow at any point that the soil isn’t frozen, it can be planted much later than most other food plot candidates. When a fall plot is failing, simply top seed 100 to 200 pounds of the mix on top of the dirt and pray for rain.

CREATING A SMORGASBORD

Now let’s put all of that together to build the ultimate holding/destination plot. By my own definition, a holding/destination plot is for those that want to keep deer on their ground 24 hours a day, as well as those that simply want to offer deer the ultimate in nutrition.

These plots must be large to achieve that. After all, if the deer are headed to a 1-acre plot to feed all night, that plot won’t be able support a handful of deer for very long before they destroy the plot with overgrazing. Really, even in relatively low deer density areas, anything less than 4 acres probably isn’t going to cut it. In high deer density areas, 4 acres will help, but 10 acres may be closer to the sweet spot.

In either case, here is where we can create a very stable food source that has incredible drawing power throughout the entire season. With food plots of 4 acres and larger, we can really offer deer a bunch of feeding options.

The most standard method I use in this case is as follows. Begin by establishing a 10-yard wide strip of clover and, if soils allow, alfalfa ringing the wooded edges of the plot. As previously mentioned, clover does better in the shade and deals with tree root competition better than most plantings. Not only is this 10-yard wide strip offering a highly desirable food source, it also takes the feeding pressure off of more difficult to establish plantings and maximizes food plot production of those shaded edges.

Next, split the remaining ground by planting half in corn and the other half in soybeans, though a pure brassica planting can be substituted to save costs. Inside the corn section we’ll top seed with the cereal rye and oats mix. In the soybean section we’ll go with a brassicas top seeding. Peanuts can often be used in place of corn and soybeans in the South.

We’re not done yet, though. Let’s also plant a minimum of six apple trees. Of the six, two should be a late-dropping variety, two mid-dropping and two early droppers. Now, assuming we wrap the trunks and cage them for protection from rodents and deer to help them survive, we’ll eventually be offering apples at the plot over the course of season.

We’re still going, though. Let’s edge feather a 5- to 10-yard swath of trees around this food plot, as well. Though we’ll cover this topic more in the next chapter, edge feathering is merely hinge cutting trees along the edges of openings. We can use this technique to focus deer travels through openings that we create.

This also massively increases the woody and leafy browse production of the property. For the importance level that many managers place on planted crops, even in the richest farm country, deer eat at least as much naturally occurring leafy growth during spring, summer and early fall, and then woody browse in winter. The extra amount of woody browse is very important for Northern deer, while all of that leafy browse helps Southern deer beat the heat of summer.

Now, let’s add it all up. We are offering deer clover, alfalfa, soybeans, corn, tender oat growth, cereal rye and brassicas. Then, add in the apples and a surplus of leafy and woody browse.
growth surrounding the plot. That’s a lot of food choices in one location! Why would a deer want to go somewhere else to eat? Outside of another area possibly offering mast crops not offered at our plot, we’ve got everything a deer could want for food.

Simply put, the more reasons we can give deer to feed on our holding/destination plot, the fewer reasons they have to go somewhere else.

ACCESSORIZING YOUR FOOD PLOTS

The next thing we need to do is accessorize our plots. Ultimately we want to give deer everything they want on our plots, and we also want them to waste time there and give us shot opportunities. That’s what we’ll try to further accomplish with accessorizing the plots.

That starts by adding at least one water source. We can do this in one of two ways. We’re going to be talking soon about using a bulldozer or backhoe to clear food plot areas. Both machines can create a water source in the blink of an eye. Simply dig about a 5-foot deep, 10-foot diameter hole in an area that can receive at least a little runoff. In super sandy or rocky soils you can put a cheap pond liner down and then cover it with a 6-inch layer of rock and sand. In most every other soil type, you don’t even need that.

For those of you not bringing in big equipment, you can simply bury a 10- to 30-gallon rubber or plastic water trough to the lip, pack the dirt in tight around the edges, put about 6 inches of dirt in the bottom and add a big stick that will allow rodents to crawl out – and bingo – there’s your water source. This is also a good technique to be used in areas that regularly suffer EHD and Blue Tongue outbreaks, as it doesn’t offer a mud flat for the midges that carry those diseases to reproduce.

As mentioned earlier, one should always select stand locations before ever clearing or breaking ground for food plots. It only makes sense that these water holes are in a safe wind direction and within shooting range of the stand site.

Let’s take it another step further and pile a few branches around the back of the watering hole to force the deer that drink there to offer us a broadside or quartering away shot.

As long as we’re drawing deer to our stands, let’s plant a scrape tree 20 yards in