

White Tailed Deer Diet Considerations

Deer are browsers. They prefer a diet of woody twigs and leaves; however, they feed on a variety of grasses, sedges and forbs (broadleaf herbaceous plants), hard mast (acorns, sumac seed), fruit and fungi. Deer are selective grazers and will feed on more than 100 species of plants. Woody browse makes up the majority of their diet year round. In spring, and early summer, forbs will be a key diet ingredient. In fall and winter, hard mast is important when available and preferred. Farm crops such as wheat, rye and soybeans provide an important part of deer diets in many areas of Oklahoma. Introduced pasture such as Bermuda provides little food value to deer.

Native plants are key to successful deer management. Important woody browse plants in the Oak Hickory and Cross Timbers/Prairie Regions of Oklahoma are blackberries, coralberry, dogwoods, elms, grapes, green briar, hackberry, oaks (acorns), persimmon, poison ivy, plums and sumac. Some of the herbaceous plants important in diets are asters, chickweed, mare's tail, crotons, clover, ragweed's and sedges.

In eastern Oklahoma, one means to enhance deer habitat is the use of prescribed fire. Prescribed fire improves palatability, nutritional quality and quantity of desired plants (both herbaceous and woody browse). Prescribed burns for wildlife should be on 3 to 5 year cycles for maximum benefit for both forage and fruit. Burns are ideally conducted in late February thru March. Patch burning is highly recommended rather than burning the entire management area.

Food plots have benefit, but have little importance when compared to native habitat management. Food plots are most beneficial in fall and winter. Cool season forages are excellent choices for fall food plots, recommended for planting wheat, rye, ryegrass mixed with ladino or arrowleaf clovers. Summer plantings should consist of cowpeas, soybeans or mungbeans.

Management of native habitat is not only beneficial for deer, but techniques described will benefit quail and turkey as well.