

# Alfalfa

## A Four-Season Forage Crop for White-tailed Deer Supplemental Plantings

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by Larry Castle, Wildlife Biologist

Most serious deer enthusiasts have heard of the nutritional benefits deer receive as a result of alfalfa utilization in the northern and mid-western states. The quality of alfalfa hay is unparalleled. It is hands-down the highest quality, highest yielding, perennial legume grown in America. Alfalfa varieties are available today that perform well in most regions of Mississippi. You are not likely to see alfalfa highly marketed for deer plantings because like iron clay cowpeas, soybeans, wheat or oats, alfalfa is not going to increase anyone's financial bottom line in the deer industry.

Alfalfa is not the answer to all your deer management woes. It will not produce 180 pound does on poor soil or a B & C buck for every hunter on your property. However, alfalfa has a place in most comprehensive supplemental deer planting programs. Deer managers who have implemented an intelligently designed warm and cool season supplemental planting program should give serious consideration to the incorporation of alfalfa.

When implemented as a year-round supplemental deer forage, alfalfa can produce more than 8,000 pounds of high quality biomass per acre, per year. A crude protein content of greater than 20 percent in the leaves combined with a high digestible protein percentage, make alfalfa a major contender in almost any supplemental white-tailed deer planting program.

Alfalfa should only be planted on good soils that are well drained and then only after soil testing, followed by limestone application to produce a soil pH of 6.5 or above. Plantings on wet sites or on acidic soils of 6.2 or less are doomed to failure. Alfalfa is best planted in the fall when soil moisture is adequate for germination. Broadcast seeding rates are normally 25 - 30 pounds per acre. An ideal stand after germination is 18 - 25 plants per square foot.

The initial growth of alfalfa will appear less than exceptional. It may even appear quite "scanty" to you if you are accustomed to vigorous stands of forages such as iron clay cowpeas, the cereal grains or some of the hardy waist-deep red clovers like arrowleaf or Redland.

Deer utilization of alfalfa is year-round. Dependent upon the availability of other supplemental deer forages and the environmental effects on native vegetation, the highest use of alfalfa is typically seen in the late spring and into the winter. Most deer managers with alfalfa experience in the southeast see late summer as the season of highest use.

Management of alfalfa is mandatory but not really difficult. Most of the new alfalfa varieties are disease resistant. Annual mowing in the spring and fall is a necessary management task. The mowing helps control competitive vegetation and also prunes the top of the established alfalfa, causing branching on the upper stems and ultimately additional leaf growth. Routinely, weed control is necessary. Selective herbicides that control grass or broadleaf weeds in alfalfa stands are readily available. Occasionally, insect damage may require the application of an inexpensive insecticide such as Malathion.

An outstanding site to learn more about the establishment and maintenance of alfalfa can be found on the internet at: [www.americasalfalfa.com](http://www.americasalfalfa.com).

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