As elongated droplets of rain water dangled precariously from perforations in the aging aluminum roof of the deer blind, I patiently awaited a pause in the storm before attempting to rattle up a mature, wide racked buck I observed hazing a doe the night before on the oat patch upon which I was now situated. As droplets dwindled and the rain regressed to a sprinkle, I extended my antlers outside the cut-out windows of the elevated wooden blind and began twisting and grinding the calcified structures together for approximately a minute. Retrieving my rattling horns back inside the blind, I scanned the savannah-like area separating mottes of mesquite and hogplum outside the plowed field. Moments later, I rattled once again, slamming the horns viciously against each other for little over a minute. Within seconds of withdrawing them inside the blind, a yearling forked horn buck appeared, running across the muddy, red, plowed South Texas soil. Seconds later, another buck erupted from the same thicket followed by two more, until four young bucks and one mature eight point were dashing across the field. Glassing the tall-tined eight point, I noticed another buck entering the field heading in my direction. It was the one I hoped for. Slinging red mud high into the air behind its back, the buck supporting 11 tall tines and a spread in excess of two feet was heading right for me when he suddenly veered off, pausing 40 yards from my elevated position. Excited, I never heard the rapport of my rifle, and before I knew it, I was dashing across the soggy grain field, leaving a deep set of tracks of my own. Holding the majestic animal, I understood the privilege just bestowed upon me and was truly gratified, but at the same time proud of the fact that my skill and hard work paid off. Not only did I deceive this aged master of the brush, but I did it on a food plot that I created myself.

As Coca-Cola is often referenced to a soda, an oat patch in South Texas is synonymous with a food plot. But as most deer enthusiasts understand, not all food plots are the same. Some are cool season food plots, others warm season. Cool season plots are planted to cereal grains like oats and wheat in the fall primarily to assist sportsmen in seeing deer throughout the winter. Warm season plots are planted in early spring strictly as a nutritional benefit for deer throughout summer. Although different, they all have one thing in common, and that is they are costly, labor intensive, and time consuming. Sportsmen continually search for ways to improve deer quality on their favorite areas. The most popular method of accomplishing this has been the food plot. Inundated by a variety of plot designs and seed mixes, native forage enhancement is often overlooked.

Native forage enhancement can be defined as the art of manipulating native habitat in order to augment the nutritional quality for all wild inhabitants, in this case whitetail deer. Native forage enhancement (NFE) is based on the successional stages in plant development. Whenever vegetation on a particular area is disturbed by activities like fire, disking, tree thinning, etc., it reverts to an earlier stage of development referred to as secondary succession.

An example of secondary succession is abandoned cropland, a common sight in agricultural regions, particularly one previously forested. No longer maintained, the area becomes inundated by grasses and other herbaceous plants. In a few years these same grasses and weeds are replaced by brush species like blackberries, sumac, and hawthorns providing excellent food for deer and hideouts for cottontails. Many years later, this plant community is shaded out by the canopy of a mature forest.

This orderly and progressive replacement of one plant community by another until a climax community occurs is referred to as ecological succession. Armed with this information, sportsmen desiring to improve deer habitat can implement a strategy in which the various stages of plant growth beneficial to deer can be established and maintained.

The advantages of NFE are many. First of all, you work with native vegetation. No seed purchase is required. You deal with vegetation deer are not only used to consuming, but often desire most. NFE can be conducted virtually everywhere you hunt. It can be performed without the use of tractors or any of the other expensive equipment used to establish conventional food plots. Thus it can be performed in difficult, hard to get to places. It also requires no fencing. Remember, NFE is the attempt to enhance the growth of native vegetation.

One technique I successfully employed in the Post Oak Hickory region of East Texas was to cut swaths through a young stand of hardwoods growing just out of the deer's' reach. These elongated clearings were established using a chain saw by simply removing some of the taller trees. The cleared strips were approximately 10 yards wide extending out to approximately 150 yards from a deer blind. The end product viewed from above would represent the spokes of a wagon wheel.

Not only were these cleared strips attractive to deer, they also facilitated harvest by increasing visibility. To increase the attractiveness of the cleared lanes by deer, I fertilized them, increasing both density and nutritional value of the herbaceous layer.

To maintain the extended openings in a developmental stage attractive to deer, I would manicure them annually removing the most rapid growing trees.

Another management tool available to the land manager is fertilizer. A plowed field is not required to develop an excellent source of nutrition for deer. Fertilizing native habitat is an excellent method of augmenting native plant growth. Combined with select cutting of older trees, the valuable life-enriching sun is allowed to penetrate the ground floor, enhancing both abundance and quality of native vegetation. The principal advantage of fertilizing native vegetation lies in the fact that you can experiment with several types of terrain and vegetation. If, for instance, you see little change or utilization of vegetation by deer on a particular area, you simply investigate another site. There are no fences, tractors, etc. required, making NFE a flexible management tool.

Where one fertilizes is crucial. For instance, fertilizer placed under a thick tree canopy cannot be expected to benefit forb growth because the shade intolerant species must have sunlight to exist. However, the same fertilizer can be spread over a naturally occurring opening and yield productive results. Remember, fertilizing is the attempt to enhance native vegetation, not establish a new plant community.

If you have the equipment, shredding and disking along the point where fields meet the mature forest is also beneficial to deer. The point where two distinctly different plant communities meet is referred to as edge, which is occupied by plants that are both desirable and beneficial to deer.

Edge can be established, enhanced, and sustained by using a variety of implements including disks, roller choppers, and aerators, but it can be established by utilizing something as simple as a railroad tie pulled behind a four wheeler. The cause and effect are the same. Only the magnitude or size of area changes when larger instruments are implemented.

In South Texas the roller chopper and aerator are popular land management tools, impacting large areas when the objective is to improve deer habitat. Many professionals refer to these practices as landscaping deer habitat.

Previously, these tools were employed over extremely large expanses, developing open space less attractive to deer. But like any technique, its impact is studied and deployment adjusted to achieve maximum benefit for the targeted species.

Today, brush management implements are employed as landscaping tools. No longer are extremely large areas disturbed, they are actually sculptured. Land managers with wildlife in mind concentrate their efforts on select portions of landholdings establishing more edge. Even when large blocks of brush are chopped, zones of impact are preselected and alternate stands of brush "travel corridors established" representing a mosaic pattern across the landscape.

Although sculpturing brush is practiced on large areas in South Texas, its benefits can be achieved on smaller landholdings by employing the same habitat management practices.

For example, shredding a strip of land occupied by blackberries would result in the development of a strip of berries in an early successional stage that is more desirable to deer. It would be occupied by a variety of plants that represent a valuable source of food for deer, at least until the vines mature and choke off the life enriching sunlight.

Fire has always played a key role in natural plant succession, in turn, wildlife welfare. Prescribed burning "fire conducted under prescription" can be employed as a management tool on private lands to develop openings, generating a diverse understory beneficial to wildlife. Fire is an excellent habitat management tool. Whether conducted

on large or small parcels, its impact is the same—"the return of vegetation to an earlier successional stage".

Although dangerous, the ability to harness the energy of fire can reverse the successional stage of plant development to benefit deer.

The ultimate way to learn fire behavior is to participate in as many burns as possible with experienced personnel. Once the basics of prescribed fire are learned, it can be employed as a practical land management tool.

Fire may be the ultimate tool in manipulating deer habitat. It is most certainly the most economic one.

Nutrition is one of three critical principles to quality deer management. However, it can be affected by a large number of variables including climate, topography, and more importantly, herd density. Regardless what is done to improve deer habitat, little can be expected to result if the deer population is not regulated. Amazingly, sportsmen will plant food plots, distribute supplements, even manipulate the habitat yet fail to harvest an adequate number of doe. Some simply fail to understand the demand deer place on habitat. Only when herd control is accomplished can natural land enhancement work. The decision is yours, but then again, so is the harvest.

Suggested captions for slides. All photos by Bob Zaiglin.

1. Winter food plots are extremely attractive to deer, allowing discretionary sportsmen opportunity to both see and field judge potential trophies.
2. Natural or man-made clearings radiating out from a deer blind are advantageous to the hunter and nutritionally beneficial to deer.
3. Native forage enhancement can be as simple as fertilizing natural vegetation.
4. The proximity of escape cover to “edge” is a vital advantage afforded deer.
5. Hunters are cognizant of the fact that rutting activity such as “scrape development” is prevalent in and around disturbed areas.