

Deer Feeding 101: What Do Deer Eat



Whether you are a hunter or simply a nature lover, feeding big game helps attract deer and other wild game to your property. Having the best hunting bow, being prepared for changes in weather and having your tree stand in the perfect spot are all important parts of hunting whitetail deer and other large game. But the best way to attract wild game to your land is to provide a steady and nutritious supply of **wild game or deer feed** throughout the seasons. This will "train" whitetail deer and other big game to visit your property often, giving you the chance you've been waiting for.

Whitetail deer can eat up to 5 pounds of food every day per deer, especially in the winter season when there is a limited natural food supply. Bucks, or male deer, need extra nutrition to help with rapid antler growth in the spring.

There are 2 main types of **deer feeders**, including free choice and spincast feeders. Free choice feeders provide a constant flow of feed because they are gravity powered. Automatic spincast feeders allow you to control the amount of feed that gets put out at any given time. Extruded nugget feeds are the best choice for automatic spincast feeders.

Whitetail deer feeding tips:

- Put deer feeders in a central location on your property away from roads and easy to access by wild game.
- Put game feeders near a water supply you know is frequented by the types of big game you are most interested in.
- Provide at least one feeding station for every 20-30 deer on your property.
- Free choice and spincast feeders are both popular and easy for deer to eat from. Free choice feeders rely on gravity and provide a steady flow of feed. Automatic spincast feeders work great to control the amount of feed that gets distributed. Extruded nugget feeds are the best choice for automatic spincast feeders.
- Hand-made wood or metal feeders with cover can be effective.
- A good feeder protects feed against weather and against non-target species. It also protects sensitive, growing antlers and provides a wide opening to keep feed from clogging.
- Feed deer blocks and minerals right on the ground.

Did you know:

- Inadequate nutrition leads to weight loss, poor conception rates, lower fawn survival increased susceptibility to disease, poor antler development and increased mortality rates.
- Supplemental deer feeding improves survival rates among fawns and helps identify superior bucks early on.
- The process of growing antlers increases a buck's energy requirement by up to 22%. Supplemental feeding gives bucks the necessary minerals and nutrients they need during antler growth.
- Deer antler growth begins in February and runs through September. Availability of nutrients and minerals is critical during this period.
- During peak months of antler growth, mineral loss exceeds mineral intake. Bucks must build up mineral reserves prior to summer.
- Healthy bacteria and yeast supplements found in feeds help support healthy digestion, growth and performance.
- Supplemental feeding helps reduce mortality in post-rut bucks.
- Bucks reach peak antler development around 5.5 to 6.5 years of age.

Seasonal deer feeding guide

Each season brings a whole new set of conditions and challenges for deer and elk. Tractor Supply Co. carries feeds that are specially-formulated to boost the nutrients deer need to not only survive, but thrive during periods of limited forage or extreme elements.

Fall deer feeding

Fall is breeding season for deer, and the weather conditions fluctuate. Breeding demands higher energy. Typically as a buck's sex drive increases during this period, their food intake goes down. Making feed readily available helps bucks keep their nutrition up.

Winter deer feeding

Winter is a time when deer are coming out of rut, or mating season. Natural forage becomes scarce, and cold winter conditions limit natural browse and forbs. Supplemental protein helps bridge the nutrition gap between winter and spring.

Spring deer feeding

Deer are coming into velvet during spring, and increased forage is available. Spring months are prime antler growing months. These months are also critical for lactating fawns. Supplemental feed is important now before natural forage becomes more abundant.

Summer deer feeding

Deers live with extreme conditions such as heat and drought, and nutrition from forage varies. Drought and heat cause extreme stress in deer. Fortified vitamins and minerals are critical for deer to survive heat and drought.

Deer food plots

Along with a solid supplemental feeding plan, deer **food plots** play an important role in delivering year round nutrition to deer.

Free ranging deer consume 25% to 40% of their diet from supplemental forage, depending on the season and amount of rainfall. Typically 5% of your total property should be devoted to food plots, depending on deer density and natural forage.

Deer food plots help bridge the gap between natural offerings and supplemental feeds and are a responsible investment for your herd and wildlife conservation. Consider the natural browse and forbs of your habitat when selecting the right plants to grow. What to feed a deer also depends on the season.

Spring and summer deer food plot nutrition

Spring and summer planting of food plot seed is often overlooked. In the spring and summer months, the nutrition level of the native habitat in many areas of the country falls well below what deer need for

optimal growth and health. Overwhelming your deer herd with more high quality plantings than they can consume is key to increasing bodyweight and improving antler growth.

Some great options for selecting deer food plot seed include:

- Spring months – Plant warm season annuals blends using grain sorghum, soybeans and cowpeas, as well as perennial blends using clovers, chicory and alfalfa. These plants all provide high quality protein and energy for pregnant does as well as for bucks in the antler growing cycle.
- Early summer – Provide soybeans, cowpeas, lablab, sunflowers, perennial clovers, chicory and alfalfa.

Fall Food plot nutrition

Deers need more energy and carbohydrate-rich foods in the fall. Deer that have access to a food plot during late winter and early spring will enter antler development and fawn rearing at a higher level of health, which means bigger, healthier does and fawns, along with increased antler growth for bucks.

- Late summer / early fall – Provide acorns, corn and soybeans. These are among deer's favorite foods.
- Fall and winter – Cereal grains including oats, triticale, and wheat. Cool season legumes such as clovers, alfalfa and winter peas attract deer and provide nutrition. Also consider brassicas family plants such as rape, turnips and kale.
- Late winter / early spring – Brassicas cultivars are attractive and provide nutrition for deer when most other food sources are gone.

Tree stand tips

Your tree stand is essential. Using the best equipment and placement can be the difference in bringing home that next big buck.

When choosing the right tree stand, look for:

- Mobility - The lighter and more portable your stand is, the more territory you will cover per hunt.
- Adaptability - The longer you spend fussing with a stand that can't adapt to every tree, the buck will already be on to you. The best stand is one that can adapt to any tree quickly and easily.
- Noise - Listen to your stand. A noisy stand will drive off potential bucks.
- Safety - Understand how to properly install your stand before you head out. Prevent falls by using safety straps and keep up on general maintenance.
- Sturdiness - Don't let your stand affect your shot. The more stable your stand is, the more accurate you can become.
- Comfort - Hunting takes patience. A comfortable stand can improve your stamina and alertness.

Setting up your tree stand:

- Traffic - Watch for where deer feed, bed and travel, or the deer "highways" in your area. These will be obvious deer trails with tracks, droppings, rubs and scrapes along the path.
- Narrow it down - Place your stand where deer traffic is narrowed from a wide to narrow corridor. Along the edges of a field, cover, ridgeline or water crossing.
- Spread out - Placing a variety of tree stands along deer trails will give you better options.
- Set up - Set your stand back off the trail eight to 10 yards and on the side of the tree away from the expected approach route.
- They gotta eat sometime - Whenever possible, place your stand near their food source. Stands near grain fields, orchards, food plots or oak ridges can be your best bet.
- Stealth - Put your stand in a tree that offers natural cover in the form of trunk girth or limb placement and stay as silent as possible.
- Sight - When setting up your stand, be as efficient as possible. Set up your stand for the best possible sight lines the first time to avoid readjustments.

Committing To Conservation

The best generation of sportsmen is always the next generation. Tractor Supply Co. is committed to responsible deer feeding and sustainable herd population management. Here are just a few steps you can take to become a steward of the land and habitat you keep for your deer.

- Always be mindful of herd management and conservation in your area.
- Be wary of over harvesting young and middle-aged bucks. Mature bucks should represent at least 30% of the total population on your property. Overcrowding can reduce antler size in your herd.
- A committed feeding plan is essential to long-term success. Bigger racks are first seen after 2-3 years of year-round feeding. Another threshold of buck size is typically reached at 6-7 years after the start of a feeding program.
- Including food plots into your annual feeding cycle can make a difference for your herd and land. Food plots provide a natural boost of nutrition for deer, and are a step towards creating a more restorative habitat on your land.
- Mossy Oak Native Nurseries® is a leader in food plot development and whitetail nutrition.

WARNING: *The feeding and baiting of wild deer is prohibited in some regions. Consult local laws and regulations before using this product.*