

# Biting into the Food Plot Market

With recent government and private mandates, plot seeders are seeing a surge in popularity. Dealers look to capitalize on the growing market.

**JOSEPH HOLSCHUH,**  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR



COURTESY OF HAYBUSTER

NASCAR driver Ward Burton pulls a 10-ft. plot seeder. Burton is one of many trying to drag land and wildlife conservation into the spotlight.

**F**ood plot seeders are beginning to get serious attention from manufacturers — and dealers are taking notice, too. While never completely overlooked, the recent surge in interest has led new entrants to the market as manufacturers devote significant resources to the development of food plot-specific seeders.

These compact implements are designed to distribute both traditional seed, such as oats and corn, and to regulate finer seeds like legumes or grasses that are planted in food plots. Used primarily by hunters for attracting wild game, the seeders are compact enough to be operated in deep timber where they seed food-plants, generally for foraging deer. The plots are also

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There have been commercially-manufactured food plot seeders in the past, but the market is seeing a resurgence from manufacturers who are beginning to view the implement as a useful tool that can turn into a profitable product line for dealerships.

### Growing the Market

"The number one reason we are getting into the market now is that a lot of states have begun to ban the baiting of deer and other wildlife," says Brillion Iron's General Manager of Farm Equipment Mike Irish. "Now, you can't just dump a bucket of corn to attract deer to your property. You have to actually grow food in the area you are hunting."

There are other factors for the push, though. Land companies in the Southeastern U.S. who have long been renting their unused timberland to hunters, are beginning to work contingency clauses into their leases that require tenants to maintain food plots in the properties. Dealers like Chris Ergle of Don Allison Equipment, Arley, Ala., and Jim Huber of Triple H Equipment, Peach Bottom, Pa., both who carry the Haybuster line, say they have been receiving a lot of calls on their seeders since land companies started to institute the change in early 2008.

"Until now, companies like

Soterra have just been timber management, now they're starting to manage game, too," says Ergle. "All of a sudden we're seeing a lot more interest in our 7-ft. drill."

Jon Cooner is Director of Special Projects for the Whitetail Institute of North America, and he sees the trend as well. The Institute has been in the business of scientifically developing ideal food plot seed mixes since 1988 and has increased business every year since. "Over the last few years, deer nutrition has been one of the fastest growing segments of the hunting industry," he notes. "We have customers who call us from all over North America."

Cooner doesn't regard the growth of food plots as an isolated phenomenon in states with deep timber, but sees steadily increasing interest wherever there is land to hunt.

### Baiting the Customer

While the market is poised for growth, it doesn't benefit the dealer until he is able to successfully bait hunters into his store.

"In reality, very few dealers understand how to sell a food plot seeder and that's a dilemma," says Bill Chestnut, product manager for Land Pride. According to Chestnut, dealers often find themselves benefiting from the informed customer profile of the

food plot buyer. He believes that while some dealers may turn sales from hunters who are looking to modify old implements, it is more common to see informed customers who just need to be pointed in the right direction.

Chestnut believes the first thing a successful dealer needs to do when selling food plot seeders is to listen closely to the customer. What are they going to do? Where are they going to do it? What are they eventually going to put down? How are they going to prepare? How big is the area they're going to develop?

It is vital that the dealer understands the customer's situation, because all of those things make a big difference in the tools they can use.

An informed customer will appreciate the salesman who is able to speak knowledgeably about the food plot seeder. "99% of the people who come in looking for a food plot seeder know somebody who has already used one, have seen where one has been used or have rented one," says Ergle. "As far as a hunter coming in and not having a clue — honestly, I've never had that customer."

## Cultivating Knowledge

Because of this, there are tremendous benefits for dealers who go out of their way to educate themselves on the product. If the salesman doesn't know the product, he will be uncomfortable. If the customer perceives that the salesman is uncomfortable, he will likely pass it by.

The customer already knows what he wants from a seeder, so the salesman must be able to explain what the product does and how it ties into the hunter's needs.

James Melcher, territory manager for Land Pride, does whatever he can in the way dealer education. He sets up photos of the seeder in action as well as before/after shots to provide his dealers and their customers with something tangible.

"The customer needs to understand what he is getting and the deal-

**"In the same way that a dealer must invest in equipment education, to see significant returns in this market, he has to actively seek out his customers..."**

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er needs to understand what he is promoting," he says. "The dealers that seem to have the most success are those who are hunters themselves. Those dealers that under-

stand the need for something like this are able to use that knowledge to educate their customers. Knowledge closes the sale."

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While Chestnut says that a dealer doesn't have to be a hunter in order to move food plot seeders, the dealer still has to know what hunters know. That's why sellers are wise to choose a manufacturer that will go to considerable lengths to make sure that product education is available.

Because of his understanding of how the food plot seeder works, Joubert is not only able to converse intelligently with informed customers, but is able to offer some practical advice for the casual hunters who come in looking for an older tool to modify for their needs.

"When I find out he's going to use it for a food plot, I'm able to show him what we have to offer, then I give him little bits of information to help justify the purchase. I tell him he could plant his lawn with it or plant a wildflower bed. I try to give him uses that will keep the whole family happy — well, the other half of the family, at least."

Whatever Value Implement is doing, they are seeing success, moving between 3 and 4 units per year.

"The customer goes home and thinks about it for a while — thinks of how nice it would be to have one tool to tow back into the woods. This is a system where he doesn't have to deal with a disc, a drag and a planter. When you start talking to people who are running sub-par machinery or still doing their food plots by hand, they're usually open to suggestions."

**Seeking Out Customers**

One of the reasons for Value's success is that they haven't just sat back and waited for the customer to come to them. In the same way that a dealer must invest in equipment education, Joubert believes that he has to actively seek out his

customers to see significant returns in this market.

"I've stopped by a lot of seed retailers in the area and dropped off literature for them to display. They're happy to do it," Joubert says. "It makes a lot of sense, really. If they can show their customers something to plant with, it helps sell seed."

These seed retailers are seeing customers using outdated machinery or equipment not designed for handling the fine-grained chicory and clover that tend to be planted on food plots.

Joubert observes that by having literature at a seed retailer, he is able to peel off the layers of uninterested customers and speak to the core prospects.

Huber of Triple H takes a different approach to finding his target customer. While he has seen some interest through farm shows, he has found the most interest when he exhibits a plot seeder at outdoor expos or sportsman shows. "Having it at these shows where they are selling guns, ammo, tents and the like, we are able to reach the people who are able to justify a purchase like this. It isn't a tool for everybody, but at these shows you get to the

hunt club managers and other people who make their living in that industry."

Huber also believes that there is success to be seen from targeting advertising in hunting magazines.

While dealer education is most effective, dealers who take the initiative are seeing the best results. Getting in contact with the customer is important. Most dealerships will have two or three times in a year when the interest in these products peaks. During the slow times of the year, his product-knowledge is brushed aside to make way for information about discs, mowers or other products that sell year-round. When the informed customer comes in knowing what they're looking for, the dealership needs to be able to do the rest.

But what about after the hunter comes in, is shown what he's looking for and is still indecisive? Ergle doesn't sell anything without demonstrating it first. "Before we sell anything, I bring it to the customer to show him how it works on his land. If he is satisfied, he pays me for it and I consider it a delivery. If he isn't, I load it on the truck and drive it back to Alabama."

## WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

While government and private mandates are a significant factor in recent food plot seeder interest, a lot of people in the market were quick to note a more human motivation driving food plot seeder success.

"These hunters are good, solid stewards of the land," observes Bill Chestnut, product manager for Land Pride. "A lot of people think that this is about going out and baiting deer, but that's not it at all. Food plot seeding is about taking an ownership in the land, and enhancing the environment for wildlife."

"The deer hunters are wonderful, because I have never seen anything else where the people involved in it, the customers, have such an interest in really learning," says Jon Cooner of the Whitetail Institute. "More and more the trend is that people want to find a way to get bigger and better deer, while at the same time improving the quality of the their land. It's a system in which people aren't concerned with killing deer — what they want to do is enjoy the process."

Because food plot seeders are an emerging market, it's in the manufacturers' best interest to make sure that potential customers are exposed to and made aware of the tool. While there is no replacement for an informed salesman, food plot seeder manufacturers recognize the benefit of an educated buyer, and they are doing all they can to reach customers who are eager to learn.

"I write articles and operating instructions, and we participate in outfits like Pheasants Forever or Ducks Unlimited," says Chestnut. "We try to get to as many hunting shows as we can each year. It's important that the people see your product out there. They have the opportunity to come by and ask questions, and they see that you understand that they have needs."

"They see that this is out there. They see that we have a tool to address these needs. We have a video on our website in which I point out every little feature and explain what it means to the hunter who is going to put in that food plot."

## Big Opportunities with Rental

People experienced with food plot seeders are quick to agree on strong rental possibilities for the implement.

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"There is absolutely a market for renting this equipment," says Chestnut. "We have a number of dealers who rent units for \$200-\$300 per day. A customer will take it out in the morning, do what he needs to do and have it back before the dealership closes that night."

Melcher sees tremendous rental opportunities as well. "A lot of my

dealers have success renting it off the lot. They're able to collect a rental fee on the unit and develop a lot of interest in the equipment. Some see the units sell after they're returned. What starts as a healthy rental business for a dealership turns into essentially a demo that the dealer gets paid for."

Dealerships aren't the only ones who have noticed a rental market for food plot seeders. Hunting clubs often rent them out to members, and it's becoming increasingly common to run across units at rental yards. Because of the type of work the food plot seeder is made for, it isn't necessarily the type of tool that needs to be used every weekend or even every year.

"We get groups of four buddies who go in together and buy them in an 'everybody gets it for a weekend' sort of deal," says Joubert. "It works because it isn't an everyday machine. Rental is a nice option because it takes some of the edge off if a hunter is looking to buy a used unit." Joubert plans to enter the rental side of the business next spring.

**Poised for Growth**

Dealers who take the time to

learn about food plot seeders are seeing success in the market. "There's been demand for something like this in the past, so I was pretty excited when the newer models came out," Joubert says.

"Since we started carrying plot seeders, sales have been pretty steady and I expect that as variable spending budgets increase, or approach where they were a few years ago, we could see sales spike up quite a bit."

Successes like Joubert's shows that a product shouldn't be avoided because it lacks mainstream appeal.

"The dealers who sell a lot of big equipment aren't necessarily invested in this," says Melcher. "Those who are invested, though — the dealers who are willing to learn about seeders and reach out to potential customers — are able to find buyers."

Irish couldn't agree more. "This is a market that is poised to take off. More and more people are doing it because everybody wants to see the 30-point buck on their wall. People want to grow bigger deer with bigger racks and there's business providing the products and education they need to do that."



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