



Key Plants for Mills County Deer Health

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Grasses, forbs, and browse plants are all included in a deer's diet at different levels. Deer are not big grass consumers except when grasses are young and tender. Studies have indicated that deer seem to prefer forbs whenever they are available, and as they become unavailable, deer shift their diets more to browse. Browse plants are usually key indicator plants because of their availability during drought and other stress periods.

Rangeland in Mills County has a long history of domestic livestock production. Most of the really preferred food plants have long since been depleted in quantity in some pastures. The importance of a plant is not only related to its preference by a deer but also to its abundance and availability.

Forbs are seasoned plants whose abundance is based on rainfall patterns. This is more true for annual forbs than perennial forbs. However, the key plants for deer management are the deep rooted, drought resistant browse plants. They are staple foods in a deer's diet. Deer browse plants can be divided into summer browse and winter browse. Winter browse plants are evergreen and summer browse plants are deciduous (plants that loose their leaves in the fall). Live oak is a good indicator of winter grazing. Nutritionally, it is a poor deer food but it is important because of its abundance and that it is an evergreen. Summer browse plants are usually deciduous trees.

The real key to a deer's plant preference is its digestive process. A deer does not readily digest plants high in lignin fiber as well as domestic animals do. Most plants in the young, tender growing stage are low in lignin fiber and as the



Mills County photographer Steven Bridges caught this buck munching on forbes near the edge of a brush thicket this summer. Because of adequate Spring rains, 2016 should be a good antler year for Mills County.

plant matures it contains a greater percentage of fiber. Therefore, deer usually seek out plants low in lignin fiber. Most ruminant animals require at least a 12% protein diet for adequate growth. A 16-20% protein diet is better. Because of their less efficient digestive process as compared to domestic livestock, deer have to be more selective in their choice of foods. High protein foods are usually chosen over lower ones.

Preferred plants are those that

generally receive moderate to heavy grazing. An abundance of young plants in the preferred category indicates a low population of browsing animals. Moderately preferred species are plants that are readily eaten by deer by are not as desirable as the preferred. Low moderate species are not preferred but will be moderately grazed as overpopulation begins to deplete the more desirable species. If deer are grazing this category heavily they will usu-

ally not be in a good state of health.

Poor browse plants are only eaten in extreme conditions such as overpopulation. Losses may occur due to malnutrition if deer are forced to eat these species. When evaluating your browse plants, don't just evaluate what plants are present, but also how much growth is within the reach of a deer. This indicates a browse line.

The browse line indicates a level where a deer or another animal such as a goat has eaten the growth to where it is out of reach. If there is little growth in reach then it would indicate excessive grazing.

Key Mills County Deer Browse Plants

- Spanish Oak
- Elm
- Honeysuckle
- Kidneywood
- Greenbriar
- Flameleaf Sumac
- Skunkbush Sumac
- Shin Oak
- Redbud
- Mulberry
- Evergreen Sumac
- Live Oak
- Blackjack Oak
- Prickleyash
- Whitebrush
- Soapberry
- R. Acacia
- Cedar
- Lotebush
- Permission
- Algerita
- Prickly Pear
- Mountain Laurel