

The Alfalfa of the South: Perennial Peanut

By Brian Sheppard

Question: I hear that perennial peanut has been nicknamed the “Alfalfa of the South.” Could you please provide information regarding this forage species and its benefit to deer and quality deer managers?

Perennial peanut is a warm-season subtropical perennial legume native to South America and Brazil. It is beneficial to food plot growers in the Deep South since no other warm-season perennial compares to its forage quality, persistence, drought tolerance, disease resistance and its numerous agricultural uses in this region of the country. Perennial peanut is grown for hay, pasture grazing, silage, conservation cover and wildlife forage. It will thrive in the Lowcountry of South Carolina, south Georgia, all of Florida, and the southern half of every Gulf State, including Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.

Perennial peanut has indeed been labeled “Florida’s Alfalfa” because of its similarity to alfalfa as an animal feed, with 13 to 32 percent crude protein depending on management. The digestibility of perennial peanut ranges from 55 to 67 percent – comparable to alfalfa – making it very palatable to both livestock and deer. Florigraze and Arbrook are the two common commercially grown varieties, with Arbrook being less cold hardy and better suited to dry sites. Florigraze is currently the most widely grown variety with approximately 26,000 acres in production.

Perennial peanut is a true perennial legume that is long-lived and does not require replanting once established. Currently there are documented stands of Florigraze more than 20 years old along with other perennial varieties more than 30 years old. Perennial peanut develops a deep and extensive root system consisting of rhizomes that enables the plant to survive drought stress and grow on low fertility soil sites. It is extremely well adapted to well-drained sandy soils in Florida but also responds to fertile soils and moisture.

Where can you get perennial peanut seed to plant using a grain drill or broadcast seeder? Unlike conventional peanuts, perennial peanut is strictly a forage variety that does not produce

seed or nuts but instead is vegetatively propagated from rhizomes located just below the soil surface. These rhizomes are removed from the soil with a sprig harvester and re-sprigged using a special machine that re-plants the rhizomes at a depth of 1½ to 2 inches in sandy soil and 1 inch in clay. Contact your county extension agent for a list of producers/contractors who sell, dig and plant perennial peanut rhizomes. There is also a Perennial Peanut Producers Association (P.O. Box 1348, Live Oak, FL 32064) that may be able to assist in locating producers.

Planting normally takes place January to March so prepare well in advance to locate rhizome sources, prepare seedbed and schedule planting equipment or contractors. If perennial peanuts are properly planted in the spring, followed by ample rainfall throughout the growing season, you can expect a complete sod by fall.

Jerry McAllister and his sons Jeff and Jay own and manage Mule Shoe Plantation, a 4,000-acre farm in southeast Alabama. This is a working farm that produces cotton and peanuts with emphasis on wildlife habitat and Quality Deer Management. They



Perennial peanut is a true perennial legume, with the oldest known stands having persisted for more than 30 years. The growing area for this crop is limited to the Deep South.

also work with a CRP cost-share program restoring warm-season native grasses and longleaf pine trees.

I first met the McAllisters seven years ago when I got wind that these guys had an aggressive warm-season food plot program and were producing big bucks in south Alabama. Jerry introduced me to perennial peanuts, and he told me that perennial peanut would soon be the answer to the southern deer managers’ perennial food plot needs since it is well adapted to the Deep South. Because Jerry is a farmer and has had plenty of “on the job training” growing perennial peanuts, I relied on him to educate me on

proper planting and management.

Seedbed preparation begins with a glyphosate herbicide application to kill all existing vegetation, with the goal of creating a weed-free food plot environment. Elimination of broadleaf weeds and grasses – especially Bermuda grass – prior to planting will give newly emerged peanuts a better chance for establishment and survival. The use of a bottom plow (commonly known as a moldboard plow) is a valuable tillage application that is recommended for compacted soils and also helps eliminate weed seed that is existent in the top three inches of the soil. Bottom plowing should be performed in February followed by disking and pre-emergent herbicide applications. Prior to planting, it is important to have a firm seedbed, which can be achieved by using a cultipacker or drag, or by heavy rainfall. Early preparation will allow time for decomposition of existing plant residue and provide opportunity to bank moisture.

Broadleaf weeds and grasses can be controlled by the same herbicides used on conventional peanuts and by mechanical mowing. Common pre-emergent herbicides include Prowl (pendimethalin), Treflan (trifluralin), and Sonalan (ethalfluralin) just to name a few. For post-emergent grass control Poast (sethoxydim), Fusilade (fluazifop) or Shadow (clethodim) are all labeled for peanut use. Cadre (imazapic) post-emergent herbicide was developed specifically for peanuts to manage purple and yellow nutsedge along with other difficult broadleaf weeds. Be sure to read and follow herbicide labels carefully or consult a chemical company representative prior to application.

Be sure to soil test annually to determine soil pH and fertilizer requirements. Perennial peanuts are sulfur dependent and

respond to recommended amounts of phosphorous and potassium. Remember that perennial peanut is a nitrogen-producing legume that requires no additional nitrogen once established. Excess nitrogen will only stimulate unwanted broadleaf weed and grass competition.

In the fall and winter be prepared for perennial peanut to go dormant after the first frost. McAllister recommends overseeding with Dixie crimson clover into the existing peanut sod to provide a cool season food source and attractant. Drill crimson clover at 15 lbs./acre or broadcast at 20 lbs./acre followed by cultipacking to ensure seed/soil contact. Allow the clover to seed out in the spring so that it can reseed the following fall. This combination will provide an ideal year-round, low maintenance food plot that will significantly reduce replanting efforts.

Initially, perennial peanuts will cost \$250 to \$300 per acre for sprigs and planting labor, not including fertilizer, herbicide or seedbed preparation. This may sound expensive at first but compared to double cropping annuals in the fall and summer, the up-front cost associated with perennial peanut establishment is minimal. As with any forage, success is achieved through proper farming techniques and management. Though no single food plot species is the “magic bean,” perennial peanuts could be the answer to the southern QDM’ers need for a graze-tolerant, drought-tolerant and disease-resistant perennial legume.



About the Author: Brian Sheppard is a food plot consultant from Georgia, owner of Wildlife Landscape Services and co-owner of Brush Clearing Services. He is also a licensed Georgia real estate agent with Bowers and Burns Real Estate Company.

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