ANNUALS TO THE RESCUE

Perennials are a cornerstone of food plot programs, but during certain conditions, annuals can solve tricky management riddles.

by *Matt Harper*

I have an outside soul, and I come from a long line of folks who feel best during days spent without a roof.

But some days, it rains, a cold wind blows from the east, and the outside looks like a gray veil. Other days, snow falls sideways, and although you're standing on the warm side of a window pane, you can still feel the cold of the white landscape. Those days give you permission to relax inside and enjoy the peace that comes with shelter. And you'll likely find me watching westerns, or as my children would say, "old westerns." One of my favorite spaghetti westerns is A Fist Full of Dollars, and one of the best lines in the movie occurs when Ramon Rojo, the villain, says to Clint Eastwood, "When a man with a .45 meets and man with a rifle, the man with a pistol will be a dead man." Of course, that statement proves to be wrong thanks to trickery via a cast-iron plate under Eastwood's serape and some lightning-fast six-gun work. In most cases, a rifle would beat a pistol, as it's typically more powerful and can hit a target at longer range. But in close quarters, when speed is essential, the pistol shows its merit.

PERENNIALS

That analogy might leave you scratching your head, but I think a rifle and a perennial food plot have some clear similarities. For an outdoorsman in the backcountry, a rifle is a must for hunting and self-protection. It's unquestionably better than a handgun for bringing down game and protecting yourself at a distance. In much the same way, I consider a perennial food plot a must in my nutritional management arsenal. Perennials are the backbone of food plot plans, as they provide the most supplemental nutrition to deer and produce a constant, consistent source of nutrients. On my farms, you will find at least one — sometimes several — large (1 to 3 acres) perennial plots of Imperial Whitetail Clover or Alfa-Rack Plus, which act as the anchors for providing quality nutrition and attracting and holding deer. Depending on the severity and duration of the extreme cold of an Iowa winter, those plots can supply sustenance for almost three-fourths of the year.

But perennials also have limitations. For example, they go dormant in the coldest part of winter to protect themselves and grow back the next spring. Most perennials also need good soil and good growing conditions, and must be maintained regularly to keep down invasive weeds and maintain proper soil nutrient levels. Perennials also require a good seedbed, time to establish and solid planting practices to ensure success.

I'm not painting a bad picture of perennials. However, in some cases, the quickness, ease and agility of an annual food plot can be the answer to a riddle.

POOR SOIL

In some situations, food plots find their homes in poorer-quality soils. Perhaps that's true most of the time, especially in farm country, where higher-quality, more valuable soils are used for agricultural crop production. By poor-quality soil, I mean soils that are at the ends of the spectrum of sand or clay, have a pH that's significantly out of balance, and have very low nutrient contents and organic matter.

When you carve out a spot in the woods or an overgrown side hill, the soil you're working is usually not the best. Annuals grow best in good-quality soils, just as perennials do, but the difference is the degree of production decrease as the soil quality diminishes. A properly chosen annual will still produce an adequate plot in poorer soil than most perennials would achieve. For example, I've had plots where I have struggled with perennials but found success with an annual. I almost always plant a nurse crop of oats, such as Whitetails Oats Plus, when I seed a perennial. The idea is that the oats come up first and protect the perennials from overgrazing, heat, erosion and weeds to allow time for the perennial to establish. I've had plots where I can't seem to get the soil right for a perennial but have a great stand of oats. I lime and I fertilize, but the soil can't hold those nutrients as long as needed for perennials. For fast-growing annuals, however, it works fine.

It's worth pointing out that there's one perennial — Whitetail Extreme — that can grow in poor-quality soil. But to my knowledge, it's the only one.

LIMITED TILLAGE

Back to our clearing in the trees or the overgrown pasture. Poor-quality soil is not your only nemesis. In many of those areas, getting sufficiently large tillage equipment to the plot to adequately till the soil for a perennial is almost impossible. Even if you own or have access to a no-till drill, you still might not be able to cross ditches, squeeze between big oaks and scale a steep creek bank with a tractor and drill to access that spot.

Almost all plantings, including annuals, will have better results with proper seedbed preparation, but many annuals can grow well with minimal soil preparation. You still need to ensure seed-to-soil contact, but most annual plots are smaller, and with an ATV and sweat equity, you can do a decent job of clearing the area and exposing the soil. Whitetail Institute No-Plow has been on the market for years and still performs amazingly well. It was designed for the aforementioned scenario. No-Plow is a mixture of hardy, fast-growing annuals comprised of grasses, legumes and brassicas, and it can be used to create hidden, out-of-the-way plots with limited access.

ROUGH GROWING CONDITIONS

People say farmers only talk about the weather, constantly complaining about it being too wet or too dry, and praying for (or cussing) rainy days. If you didn't come from a farm background but are now a food plotter, a year or two of trying to grow things will put you alongside farmers in a coffee shop complaining about the weather. You can do everything right, creating a perfect seedbed, planting exactly by the instructions and applying the perfect amount of fertilizer, but if it doesn't rain, all is for nothing. You simply can't control the weather.

Perennials tend to be more sensitive to moisture levels — too much and too little — especially as a seedling, as the plants are trying to establish a root system that will keep them coming back year after year. Annuals, conversely, have one objective: to grow as fast as possible to reach maturity and produce seeds that will ensure the perpetuation of their species. Because of that difference, most annuals are less sensitive to moisture level swings. Even annuals need some rain and will die if flooded for an extended period, but depending on the type of annual, they can be far less affected by moisture shifts.

TIMING

Most of us cannot spend every day at our hunting property, tinkering around and being completely prepared to act quickly when the perfect planting window opens. Although we probably wish that were true, we have full-time jobs we need to pay for our hunting addiction. And it seems like you're usually working double shifts, traveling constantly or engaged in some other work activity that keeps you busy when you should be putting seeds in the soil. Even if you aren't working extra hours, it can seem like weekdays are sunny and dry, but every weekend brings torrential downpours, making you check how many vacation days you have left. If you push the envelope in terms of seeding late or after the recommended planting window for a perennial, annuals can be a good backup plan. Let's say you want to plant a spring plot of perennial clover, but weather or your work schedule keeps you out of the field, and you miss the planting dates. Imperial PowerPlant is a good alternative, as it can be planted a bit later into spring or early summer with good success and still provide the nutrition and attraction you're seeking.

In general, annuals are a bit more forgiving with planting dates, as they tend to grow faster than perennials (at the seedling stage). Depending on the annual, you need to get a few inches of growth. Imperial Oats Plus, for example, doesn't not need to be mature to be attractive and nutritious. In fact, it's better to have it 4 to 6 inches tall, which, depending on rain and heat units, might only take a few weeks after planting.

TIMING OF NUTRITION

Perennials can provide consistent quality nutrition for much of the year, especially if you use a cold-tolerant variety. But, when temperatures drop below freezing and stay there, perennials will go dormant. To provide a food source in winter, annuals such as brassica mixes are great options. In the Midwest, brassicas are planted in late summer, sometime around early August. That allows for adequate temperatures for good growth before first frost, providing large amounts of energy-rich food for deer in winter.

I've used Imperial Winter Greens and Tall Tine Tubers for many years with great success, and recently added

radishes to the mix. Deer seem to hit the radishes a bit earlier than the other brassicas, producing somewhat of a succession feeding plan. With the Tall Tine Tubers and Whitetails Ravish Radish, you get the advantage of aboveground vegetation and the tuber/radish, which deer paw out of the ground and eat. These plots also make for great hunting during the late season.

HUNTING PLOTS

When people discuss hunting plots, most folks think of smaller, out-of-the-way areas surrounded by thick cover, often planted in some kind of annual. That's an accurate description, but I think it's important to note that all food plots — provided deer are using them — can be considered hunting plots. One of my best bowhunting plots is an Imperial Clover field in a small clearing about 300 yards from my main feeding food plot. Deer stage in that area and get a few bites of clover before heading to the bigger plot, and they typically do so at least an hour before sunset.

Still, annuals are a very common planting for hunting plots for a couple of reasons. First, in some cases, it's more difficult to access those plots with larger tillage equipment, so they require a planting that will grow with minimal tillage, such as Imperial No-Plow, Secret Spot or Bow Stand. But that's not the only reason. We just discussed how annuals can be used for targeted nutritional sources for specific times of year, and the same holds true with attraction for hunting. Plant food sources tend to be more attractive at particular times in their growth cycles. As mentioned, oats are more attractive when young and growing than when mature. That can also be said for wheat and rye. You can plant annuals to try and hit the perfect attraction phase to match your hunting plans. Another example of attraction timing with annuals involves brassicas, which tend to be most attractive during colder periods. When you plan to hunt that plot will influence what you're planting. Combinations of plant varieties, such as Imperial Winter Peas Plus, can be planted in hunting plots, and because they contain a mix of forages that are attractive at various times, they can be effective throughout the season.

CONCLUSION

Deer management is much like a puzzle, as it takes many pieces to bring the picture together. Perennial food plots are pieces of that puzzle, but so are annuals. To maximize your program and have a complete picture requires the use of annuals in the ways I mentioned, but that doesn't cover all the ways you can use annuals in a management scheme. You have many annuals to choose from, each with unique characteristics that provide some necessary part. It's like having several tools in a tool box. You can identify a need and pull out the appropriate tool to meet those needs.