

CHECKLIST FOR FALL FOOD PLOT SUCCESS

Follow this schedule to stay on top of food plot tasks during the off-season.

by Jon Cooner

Spring / Summer Checklist

Legend


- Step 1: Preparing Seedbed and Planting Perennial In Pre-Green-up
- Step 2: Preparing Perennial Seedbeds in Spring and Planting

PRE-GREEN-UP - Before spring green-up. Soil cycling through freeding and thawing. Perform laboratory soil tests on all food-plot sites. Add lime to any seedbeds that need it. Disk or till lime into new seedbeds.

Also Apply IMPACT

- IMPACT** - from Spring Green-up until Summer
- Existing Perennial Stands
 - Fertilize
 - Spray Arrest MAX and Surefire if needed
 - Spray established clover and alfalfa with Arrest MAX and Surefire if needed

Frost seed exposure (if needed)



■ The checklist might seem long and complex, but it really isn't. You already know much of the information and are simply mapping it out in a timeline.

With deer season months away and so many other activities vying for our time, it can be tempting to lose focus on how important spring and summer are to fall hunting success. With that in mind, here's a checklist of what you should be doing during spring and summer to make sure your food plots and deer are in top shape when hunting season arrives.

This might seem long and complex at first. It really isn't. You likely already know much of the information. I've just attempted to set it out as a timeline that looks a little complex. I hope it will also give you a way of understanding the entire process, not just a series of steps, so it becomes even simpler. I'll start each section with an overview of what you'll be doing at each stage.

THE PRE-GREEN-UP PERIOD

We'll define this as the period before spring green-up, when the soil is cycling through freezing and thawing. Pre-green-up begins at the start of the Whitetail Institute's published planting dates for perennials in your area. (You can find planting dates on product bags and at whitetailinstitute.com.) It ends when spring green-up begins in your area. Your main food-plot goals during this time are to start maintaining your existing perennial stands, begin converting fall annual stands to perennial stands and start preparing seeds for planting spring annuals.

You'll also have an important decision concerning new sites you plan to plant in perennials, because that will dictate what you'll need to do during spring and summer. You have two options: Prepare the seedbed and plant perennials in spring, or prepare the seedbed during spring and summer, and wait to plant until fall. A full discussion of how to make that decision is too long to undertake here, but important considerations include soil pH, weed and grass competition, and, to some extent, even soil quality. Most soils are acidic, with a pH of less than 6.5, and need lime to increase the pH to neutral (6.5 or

higher). Option 2 gives you extra time to do a thorough job preparing the seedbed. Also, increasing soil pH with lime takes time. Adding lime a few months before planting provides more effective, longer lasting benefits to soil pH. The effect can be hastened to some degree by using Impact just before planting.

Another major consideration is the amount of weed and grass competition you can anticipate during spring and summer. In most cases, it will be vastly easier to control most grasses and weeds before planting a fallow site than after, which strongly supports waiting to plant perennials in fallow sites until fall. That allows you time to do a thorough job of controlling grass and weed competition during spring and summer before planting, including applying herbicides, repeated tilling or planting Revive in spring. Revive can help control weeds and boost soil quality, and can even make phosphorous and potassium more readily available to fall plantings.

All food plot sites: Perform laboratory soil tests on food plots and new food plot sites. When you receive soil test reports, add the lime recommended to existing and new sites. On new sites, thoroughly disk or till the lime in as soon as possible.

Existing perennial food plots (maintenance): Consider frost seeding additional perennial seed into existing stands if needed to help rejuvenate them after winter and get a jump on spring weeds. A great time to do this is when the soil is thawing during the day and re-freezing at night. The flexing of the soil can pull the seed into good contact.

New perennial food plot sites (Option 1, if planting during pre-green-up): The Whitetail Institute's published planting dates for perennials are well before spring green-up in most areas of North America. Soil pH starts increasing as soon as you incorporate lime into the seedbed. It takes time for it to fully increase soil pH. Consider also spraying Impact for a rapid boost in soil pH before planting if you'll be planting a perennial in spring.

SPRING

Spring begins at the natural green-up in your area and ends when soil temperatures reach a constant 65 degrees or higher. Your main food-plot goals for this period are to start perennial maintenance, which you'll continue into summer. That includes fertilizing and performing grass and weed control in existing perennial stands. This section has an option for pre-emptive weed-control during preparation of the seedbed for PowerPlant, Conceal, Revive and Sunn Hemp, but you won't actually plant those products until later.

You need to perform recommended maintenance steps on Whitetail Institute perennials starting in early spring if you expect to maximize their forage quality and lifespan. The steps are pretty simple. You might have already tackled two major steps during pre-green-up: having your soil tested, and adding required lime. But if you haven't, do it now. Also, be sure to perform the other steps: fertilizing, spraying for grass and mowing. These are specified in the maintenance instructions for each Whitetail Institute perennial, which you can find on the back of product bags and at whitetailinstitute.com.

Just as making sure soil pH is neutral for high-quality forage plants to uptake nutrients, you should also make sure nutrients in the soil are at optimum levels. The soil tests you performed during pre-green-up will tell you precisely whether the levels in your soil are optimum. If nutrient levels are low, the test reports will explain what fertilizer you should add. Following the report recommendations ensures you'll have done all you can to offer an optimum growing environment, and that you'll save money by avoiding purchasing unnecessary lime and fertilizer.

As the Whitetail Institute's first director of forage research, Wiley Johnson, often said, "In spring, grass control is your No. 1 priority in maintaining perennials. If you don't control grass in a timely manner, it can eat the stand up in a hurry." In most cases, grasses are best controlled in Whitetail Institute perennial stands by spraying Arrest Max. For optimum results add Sure-Fire Crop Oil Plus to the Arrest Max spray tank.

Existing perennial stands: Fertilize as recommended in your soil-test report.

Some folks prefer to put out half the recommended fertilizer in spring and the other half in fall to help keep levels more constant.

Spray Arrest Max and Sure-Fire Crop Oil Plus if grasses appear. If necessary and appropriate — in established stands of clover and alfalfa only — also spray Slay and Sure-Fire to control broadleaf weeds. Do not spray Slay on newly planted plot until the plants are established. See the Slay label, or call (800) 688-3030 for information before spraying.

Mow existing perennial plots when you see anything in the plot (forage plants, grasses or weeds) start to flower or put on seed heads. Your goal is to remove the flowers or seed heads from weeds or

Spring / Summer Checklist

Legend
 Option 1: Preparing Seedbed and Planting Perennial in Pre-Green-up
 Option 2: Preparing Perennial Seedbed in Spring and Planting in Fall

"PRE-GREEN-UP" – Before spring green-up. Soil cycling through freezing and thawing

- Perform laboratory soil tests on all food-plot sites
- Add lime to any seedbeds that need it
- Disk or till lime into new seedbeds
- Also apply IMPACT (Plant)
- Frost seed existing perennials (if needed)

"SPRING" – From Spring Green-up until Summer

Existing Perennial Stands

- Fertilize
- Spray Arrest MAX and Surefire if needed
- Spray established clover and alfalfa with Slay and Surefire if needed

- Mow as needed

POWERPLANT, CONCEAL, REVIVE and Sunn Hemp

- (Optional) Add lime, and disk early, allow weeds to return, and spray glyphosate.

- Plant once soil temps reach 65 degrees or higher

"SUMMER (1st Half)"

Existing Perennial Stands

- Continue weed control efforts as needed

New Perennial Seedbeds (Optional)

- Disk or till at 2-week intervals

POWERPLANT, CONCEAL, REVIVE and Sunn Hemp

- Apply IMPACT to growing PowerPlant, Conceal, Revive and Sunn Hemp if needed to boost soil pH

- REVIVE - Till standing REVIVE back into soil when blooms first appear (4-8 weeks after planting)

"SUMMER (2nd Half) to Fall"

Existing Perennial Stands

- Continue weed control efforts as needed

New Fall Seedbeds (Optional)

- 3-4 inch disking about a month before planting, allow weeds to return, and spray with glyphosate

- Plant fall plots during fall planting dates

- High-N Fertilizer, if called for in product instructions, fertilize again 30-45 days after germination with high-N fertilizer.

Like other summer activities, taking care of food plots should be a pleasure. Staying organized just helps smooth the process.

grass, and remove most of the flowers from the forage plants. Usually mowing two or three times during spring and summer is sufficient.

Don't mow perennials below 6 inches, and don't take off more than a couple of inches at a time. Also, don't mow when conditions are hot or droughty, and don't mow within one week before or after applying herbicides.

PowerPlant, Revive, Conceal and Sunn Hemp: The recommended planting dates for PowerPlant, Conceal, Revive and Sunn Hemp are later in spring than the planting dates for perennials. These should not be planted until soil temperatures have reached a constant 65 degrees, day and night, which is usually at least several weeks after spring green-up starts.

That gives you an option to be proactive in minimizing weed and grass competition.

Consider doing seedbed prep a bit early — a few weeks before you intend to plant — let weeds and grasses return (with spring green-up) and then spray them with a Roundup-type glyphosate herbicide. Then, plant when the soil temperatures are sufficiently warm.

Be sure to spray Arrest Max and Sure-Fire to control grasses that appear in PowerPlant soon after planting. (Do not spray Conceal or Revive or with a herbicide.) Apply Impact before seeding if you need a rapid boost in soil pH.

SUMMER (FIRST HALF)

Existing perennial stands: Continue weed control efforts as needed.

Revive: This will start to bloom about four to eight weeks after you plant it. As soon as the first blooms appear, disk or till the standing Revive back into the soil. To help stop seed production and prevent new weed seed from germinating, it's crucial that you don't skip this step. After soil temperatures reach a constant 65 degrees,

fertilize the seedbeds according to the soil tests, and plant PowerPlant, Conceal and Revive.

PowerPlant, Conceal, Revive and Sunn Hemp: Apply Impact if needed to give soil pH an additional boost.

Perennials planted in pre-green-up (Option 1): Reapply Impact to perennial stands to which you initially applied Impact when you planted during pre-green-up.

Seedbeds planted in a perennial in fall (Option 2): Consider continuing to disk the seedbed at strict two-week intervals during the first half of summer. This will bring up dormant weed seeds from the soil, where they will germinate and then be killed the next time you disk.

SUMMER (SECOND HALF) TO FALL

Let's define this period as being about one month before the fall perennial planting date.

Fallow sites: new perennial food plot sites (Option 2, if planting in fall): If necessary to control remaining grasses and weeds, stop disking or tilling about a month before your fall planting date.

Then allow weeds and grasses to start growing again, and then spray them with a Roundup-type glyphosate herbicide before planting.

Plant: Plant fall food plot products according to the instructions on the bag. Plant during the planting dates recommended for your area.

High-N fertilizer (if appropriate): Fertilize non-nitrogen-fixing forages with additional high-nitrogen fertilizer, if specified, 30 to 45 days after germination.

One more thing: Don't forget to put out your Whitetail Institute 30-06 mineral/vitamin supplements. They're the icing on the cake for helping maximizing antler size, fawn size, doe lactation and overall herd health.

Like other spring and summer activities, taking care of food plots should be a pleasure, especially when you consider what you're giving back to the land, the quality time you get to spend with family, and the feeling of satisfaction you'll get in fall when the results come back to you in a big way.



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