



PHOTO BY CHARLES J. ALSHEIMER

CLOVER IS KING FOR FOOD PLOTS

Imperial Whitetail Clover provides uncountable benefits for your herd. This year, plant grub that deer love.

■ by *Josh Honeycutt*

A massive-bodied, chocolate-antlered brute eases out of the timber, pushes through thick early successional cover, and emerges in a lush, green clover plot. The sound of beheaded Imperial Clover echoes throughout the plot. As the buck raises his head to survey the landscape, three-leafed forage falls out of his mouth with each movement of his jawbone.

If there's ever been a more beautiful sight, I haven't seen it, and I've been to the beach — a lot. There's nothing better than watching a whitetail benefit from a food plot you created, and filling a tag on a mature buck over a plot the epitome of the experience.

IS CLOVER KING?

Clover has been around for thousands

of years, but hunters have been planting it for deer for decades. Clover is king in the world of food plots, and there are many reasons why. Whitetail Institute Director of Operations Brandon Self shed some light.

“Once it gets established, it's very hardy,” he said. “And really, as far as palatability, it's hard to beat clover with a good pH. If fertilized right, it's the best perennial food plot you're going to get.”

A legume, clover is a great food source for deer and also helps the soil by putting nitrogen back into the ground. The process involves pulling this vital element from the air and transferring it to the soil. In this regard, inoculated seeds improve efficiency. Nitrogen-fixing bacteria attach to the roots, forming nodules. That's where the conversion process occurs.

Legumes such as Imperial Clover are the food plot species that do this.

Even without the soil-care benefits clover provides, high protein and palatability levels make it a no-brainer. Clover is king in the world of man-provided deer foods.

PLANTING TO PERFECTION

Like all things, being prepared is critical, and procrastination is clover's worst enemy. Take soil samples long before planting. Having a good pH increases nutrient-uptake efficiency, resulting in bigger, healthier plants. If nothing else, contact your local ag extension agency for assistance.

Of course, planting clover can be as simple or complex as you like. But regardless of your experience or goals, you

should follow certain steps to get the most from your Imperial Clover plots.

“Don’t just go out and get fertilizer,” Self said. “Get as close as you can to the fertilizer recommendations that are on the soil test.”

After you’ve sent off the soil sample, start preparing the ground. This should be done weeks before planting day.

“Don’t wait until the day before you’ll plant to start breaking ground,” Self said. “The more in advance you prepare the ground, the more weed-free it will be, and the more your seedlings will be able to grow without competition. The earlier you can break ground, the more weed seed you’ll turn up to germinate. Then, you can till it again. So, the earlier you prepare ground, the better.”

Then, when you’ve worked up the ground a time or two and weeds are handled, apply the recommended fertilizer called for by the soil test results. Generally, the desired pH level is 6.5 to 7.0. After you apply the fertilizer, lightly disc or till the ground a final time, and then culti-

pack it. The seedbed is prepared.

Whether using a hand-crank or motor-powered broadcaster, make sure seeding rate settings are correct. You don’t want to spread clover too thick or thin. Also, never forget how small clover seeds are.

“Don’t plant seeds too deep,” Self said. “Really, plant it on top of the ground, and no more than 1/8-inch deep. If you have a cultipacker, the best way to plant clover seed is to cultipack the ground after the ground is prepared, clean and ready to go. Then, broadcast your seed, and cultipack it one more time.”

That’s all it takes to grow a great clover plot. Of course, you can take steps to boost yields and usability.

MAXIMIZING EFFICIENCY AND YIELD

Folks who wish to take their clover plots to the next level should also think about other aspects, such as advanced fertilizing tips, increased weed control and fine-tuning planting dates. It sounds repetitive and cliché, but taking soil

samples and applying the exact fertilizer and lime needed does more than ensure growth. It also improves palatability and the sweetness of the plant. Deer recognize those things and will target the clover more or less accordingly.

“Maintaining your soil pH throughout the year will ensure a healthy, productive and high-yielding crop,” Self said.

Weed control is another advanced practice. Starting this process early enough decreases competition in the long term.

“A lot of people try to kill weeds that are mature and hard to [terminate],” Self said. “The earlier you spray young weeds, the better control you will have.”

Arrest Max is great for grass control. Spray the plot when grasses begin to grow. Slay gets the job done on broadleaf weeds. Plus, periodical mowing helps knock back unwanted plants, too. Do so anytime you see undesirables outpacing the clover, especially when they begin to produce seed heads. Mow just low enough to prevent the flowering process.

Overbrowsing is something else to con-

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sider. In areas with lower deer densities, spring planting is usually best. However, if you're worried about overbrowsing, fall often offers certain advantages (whitetailinstitute.com/whitetail-clover-planting-dates/).

In areas of low to moderate deer populations, Self encouraged food plotters to plant in spring. This isn't conducive to all areas of the country, he said. But if you plant a perennial clover in spring, the weather is right and you conduct proper ground preparation, you should have more growth for the fall hunting season.

Spring seeding doesn't come without unique challenges, though. You have more weed competition to deal with by planting in spring and summer.

"But if you fall plant, you don't have as much growth as when you plant in the spring," Self said.

So, there are obvious tradeoffs. Still, for some people, that might be the best option. Some locations have high deer densities, and overbrowsing is a problem. You can combat that, even if you don't

have electric exclusion fences.

"If you have a really high deer density, and they get on it, it's not going to really matter if you spring or fall plant — they will overbrowse it," Self said. "But you can use a cover crop easier in fall, like oats or brassicas, to keep them from overbrowsing while it's getting established. If you fall plant, you can use Whitetail Oats. They'll eat the oats while the clover establishes."

Overall, if browsing pressure is high — especially on micro plots — Self encouraged the use of more variety. Instead of using clover by itself, perhaps add some Fusion, which has chicory and adds overall tonnage. That should help mitigate browsing pressure.

AN IMPERIAL PRODUCT

Some food plotters mistakenly think all clover seeds are created equal. That isn't true. Imperial Clover (whitetailinstitute.com/imperial-whitetail-clover-perennial/) raises the bar.

"The biggest reason is the many years of research and development of seed to

establish great palatability, high protein levels and more drought resistance than other clovers. Our RainBond seed coating pulls ground moisture to the seed to promote seedling vigor and quick germination."

Genetically designed for whitetails, this seed offers increased protein levels, which enhances antler, bone and muscular growth. It also benefits does and helps them maintain and add bodyweight during pregnancy, and produce more milk when fawns arrive.

Further, quicker germination can make great differences in success or failure.

When established, Imperial Clover can last up to five years from one planting, especially if it's properly monitored and maintained.

SOIL TEST KIT

Whitetail Institute Soil Test Kits provide the data you need for great food plots. Professional laboratory soil testing is one of the most important things you can do to ensure food plot success. The Whitetail Institute offers professional results and recommendations for all Imperial Whitetail products, as well as other crops. Accurate fertilizer and lime recommendations are provided.



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