



# FROST SEEDING:

PHOTOS BY JASON SAY





# HOW AND WHY

Get a jump on the growing season by seeding when the snow flies.  
It can pump new life into old plots.

■ by *Scott Bestul*

If you ever doubt how attractive a clover plot can be to whitetails, I have scads of stories for proof. But the latest, and perhaps my favorite, occurred this past fall. My dad, who's 91 and still chasing whitetails, was sitting at one of our best clover plots on Minnesota's archery opener. Several does had fed into the plot early, but three bucks waited until prime time to appear. Dad, never too concerned about antler size, ignored the two larger bucks in the rear and focused on the lead buck. When that deer fed into bow range, Dad leveled his crossbow ... and delivered a bolt that sailed over the buck's back.

The other two bucks decided the odd sound from the tower blind was enough excitement for one night and

left, but the target buck settled down to munch on more clover. Amazingly, Dad stood, re-cocked the crossbow, loaded a second bolt — and missed again.

Dad was, for obvious reasons, pretty upset about his performance during that amazing hunt. But with a little coaching, a pep talk or three, and the construction of a better shooting tripod, I coaxed him back for another hunt. On that evening, barely a week after his three-buck encounter, Dad watched as another buck — this one a tall-racked 10-point — fed into the same spot as the deer he'd whiffed before. This time, Dad settled in, touched off the shot and watched as the mortally wounded buck tore off. We recovered the buck only 15 yards off the edge of the Imperial Whitetail Clover.





■ It's typically best to frost seed when the ground is frozen but spring is threatening — usually late February through March in Northern latitudes.

Of course, I'm recounting that story to brag about my father, but the tale has a secondary — and equally important — purpose: to sing the praises of frost-seeding clover. Months before that hunt, during a March day when winter and spring fought a duel for dominance, I visited that clover plot. On my shoulder was a hand-crank seeder loaded with Imperial Whitetail Clover. Patches of snow dotted the landscape, but I walked the plot and spread seed that fell across frozen dirt, swaths of dormant clover and streaks of ice and snow. Typically I'm drenched in sweat when I finish seeding a plot, but that day, my cheeks were red, and I stuck my fingers in my coat pockets at every opportunity.

But the result was worth it. That clover plot, now in its fifth year, got a shot in the arm that made it just as attractive to white-tails as it was in its prime. Frost seeding was responsible for that, I'm convinced, and also for my dad seeing four great bucks during a pair of hunts.

## WHAT IS FROST SEEDING?

Like most food plotting equipment and techniques, frost seeding is something plotters stole directly from farmers. The practice is used in agriculture to boost production of existing pastures. According to the Penn State Extension website, "Frost seeding is an economical way to establish cover crops in winter in standing wheat or barley or to supplement a thin forage stand. Though not as fool-proof as drilling, it is a reasonably successful practice." For several years, I hunted a large property near my home, and the farmer used rotational grazing to keep pastures viable for his sheep and cattle. He commonly used frost seeding to extend the life of his pastures without enduring the expense of tilling and replanting those fields.



### IMPERIAL WHITETAIL CLOVER

- Includes the only clovers ever scientifically developed for food plots for white-tailed deer.
  - **Perennial:** Lasts up to five years from one planting.
  - High protein; heat-, drought- and cold-tolerant; disease-resistant.
- Optimum Growing Environment:**
- **Soil Type:** Good quality, heavy soils that hold moisture (bottomland soils).
  - Avoid lighter or sandier soils and sites that drain quickly.
  - **Soil pH:** 6.5-7.5
  - **Sunlight:** As little as four hours of broken, filtered or direct sunlight per day.
  - Can be planted in spring or fall.



As the name implies, frost seeding is typically done in late winter or early spring. Seed is spread directly on the ground, which, thanks to freezing temps at night and thawing temps during the day, is continually heaving. The active nature of the soil lets seeds make contact with the dirt and then get worked down into the topsoil. When soil temps warm, seeds germinate, and they're off to the races. I've used frost seeding mostly in clover plots, but you can also use it effectively in annual food plots, such as wheat, Pure Attraction, and oats.

From my experience, frost seeding has three major benefits. First, it can extend the life of a clover plot by introducing new growth into a sea of plants that are nearing the end of their life cycle. As most veteran clover growers know, the first few years of a clover plot usually represent the peak attraction period for deer. The plants are young and tender, not only packed with protein but also tasty. But as the stand ages, even with the best maintenance, the plant population thins. Frost seeding can give an aging plot the shot in the arm it needs in its last phase of life.

Second, frost seeding can help combat weed growth, particularly if there are bare spots in your plot. Some of those will likely be evident as you visit the plot to frost seed, but I know several land managers who mark those under-seeded areas by flagging them before snowfall. Then, when they return in spring, they have clearly defined spots that require a little extra attention. Imperial Whitetail Clover is a fairly aggressive grower after it's established, and frost seeding lets desirable plants get a nice head start on weed competition. In my experience, this has been so successful that I can often forgo herbicide use and keep weed growth at bay by simply mowing at the appropriate times.

Finally, frost seeding can save time and, occasionally, money. Although even frost seeding won't make a solid plot last forever, it delays tilling up and replanting a plot at the end of its life cycle. Most of us are hard-pressed for time, and some years, we don't have enough hours to do all the things we should. More than once, when life has dealt me a schedule crammed with stuff that interferes with deer management, I've used frost seeding to allow a one-year reprieve.

### HOW TO PULL IT OFF

As noted, frost seeding is best done when the ground is still frozen but spring is threatening. My friend Kip Adams, director of conservation at the National Deer Association, is a Pennsylvania resident and land manager. He likes to frost seed in late February through March, because spring green-up is typically in mid-April in the Keystone State. Adams isn't afraid to frost seed into an inch or more of snow. This timing should work across most areas of similar latitude, with the best windows occurring earlier

in the South (January and February) and later in more northern climes (April or even early May in some years).

Ideally, plots you intend to frost seed should be hit with a herbicide in fall, which should knock back weed competition and give your preferred crop a great start. But if you missed this step (I'm typically guilty, as I spend my limited free time hunting in fall and — full confession — I've had my fill of food plot work by then), go ahead and frost seed. Most expert plotters I talk to follow recommended seeding rates when frost seeding, but I tend to apply a little extra seed, especially in areas I know are thin or bare. I don't expect a full germination catch when frost seeding, so I'm typically a little generous.

Obviously, you should conduct a soil test to find lime and fertilizer needs, but that can be delayed. I wait until full green-up, complete the soil test and then apply the recommended amendments.

It's important to take follow-up trips to inspect the plot after the weather has warmed and green-up is underway. These

let me gauge the success of my seeding, but even more important, get an idea of weed competition. I've learned through hard experience that getting a jump on weed control starts with identifying the culprits early (I consult with people smarter than me to identify weeds) and then make a plan to curtail their growth before they have too much of a head start. Lean on Whitetail Institute's staff to help identify and remedy weed issues.

### CONCLUSION

Frost seeding will never replace the traditional steps for establishing a food plot. But it can be a viable tool in a food plotter's arsenal and, as my dad's buck proved this past fall, can pump new life in a plot that might have been history without it. In fact, I'm going to visit that plot again this spring with a seeder slung on my shoulder. I'm hesitant to say goodbye to a plot that's served us well, and I'm hoping it can produce at least one more buck for our crew.



## Set Your Sights on Brillion Farm Equipment

Brillion Farm Equipment offers a full-line of equipment suited for food plot enthusiasts. The Food Plot Seeder is an all-in-one solution for food plots handling seedbed preparation, seed metering and placement, as well as seedbed finishing. Brillion's ground driven Till 'N Seed' shreds existing food plots and plants numerous food plot seed mixtures. All products are backed by Brillion's years as an industry leader in the Seeder and Pulverizer industry!



**Till 'N Seed'  
Model BPSBA-8**

The Till 'N Seed is now available in 8' working widths in pull-type or three-point hitch configurations.



**Food Plot Seeder  
Model FPSB-6**



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