



PERENNIAL FOOD PLOT MAINTENANCE:

# ABOUT MORE THAN LOOKS

Many food plotters misunderstand why weed control in perennial stands is so important.

■ by *Jon Cooner*



**T**he Whitetail Institute publishes step-by-step instructions for maintaining its perennial food plot stands. Those instructions have been carefully designed to help maximize the attractiveness, longevity and nutritional quality of plantings. That's especially true with the weed control steps. Don't give in to the temptation to skip them.

It's not unusual to see folks online ask whether controlling weeds in perennial food plots is really necessary. Someone invariably replies that there's really no reason to control weeds in perennial stands and, in support, offers the contentions that a food plot doesn't have to look perfect to work, and that deer eat weeds, too. To some degree, each is true. However, they miss the reasons why weed control in perennial stands is so important.

Bottom line: It's counterproductive to have weeds in your food plot. We're not talking about achieving perfection with a food plot that has zero weeds. That's not possible in most situations. No matter how well you prepare and plant your food plot, you'll almost always have some weeds at some point. Weed control is a never-ending war. Your goal is to win the battles and, by doing so, maximize the quality and longevity of the stand.

Just because deer eat weeds doesn't mean that we should allow weeds to grow unchecked in food plots. Doing so is counterproductive to the lifespan and quality of the stand. Whitetail Institute perennials are designed to last three to five years or more from one planting. Just as you have to change the oil in your car to maximize its life, you must do some spring and summer maintenance on perennial stands to help them last as long as they should. Many weeds out-compete food plot plantings — especially those that produce seed, which most do — and they will substantially shorten the intended lifespan of perennial food plots if not controlled.



Also, remember the nutritional reason why we plant food plots: not to completely feed deer but to supplement the nutrition they get from Mother Nature. In real-world situations, deer use food plots as only one part of their diets, and they continue to feed on natural vegetation, especially when that vegetation is still young and highly palatable. Deer have plenty of access to weeds and other naturally occurring food outside of food plots. The critical consideration is that the amount of surface area and root space in a food plot is limited, and you'll need to control weeds if you want to put it to the best use.

Root space is a zero-sum game, which means multiple competitors vie for something of a fixed quantity. Because the amount of the commodity being competed for never increases, as one competitor acquires more of it, the other gets less. In our case, that's root space, and the competitors are high-quality food plot plants versus native weeds and grasses. The more weeds you have in your food plot, the fewer and smaller forage plants you have. That's a crucial understanding. Weeds shading forages and competing for soil moisture account for significant forage losses from competition. That can fit into the zero-sum line of thought, particularly in a dry year.

As mentioned, most native vegetation is much less nutritious and palatable than Whitetail Institute perennials. The more root space that's occupied by your forage planting, the greater the attraction and nutritional benefit your plot will offer. And isn't that the point? It makes little sense to put in the time and effort to properly prepare and plant a seedbed and then allow the planting to be overtaken by weeds.

Weed control starts during seedbed preparation. The planting instructions for each Whitetail Institute product include weed control steps that should be performed even before planting. Many folks don't realize that all the seedbed preparation and planting steps are important to weed control efforts.

Soil testing to determine soil pH and fertility, and properly liming and fertilizing, are necessary to ensure a planting can grow quickly and be as thick and lush as possible. Consider how import-

ant that is from a weed control perspective. As the Whitetail Institute agronomist Dr. Carroll Johnson says, "Most weeds are opportunists. They tend to establish in areas of food plots where the crop is thin. If you leave bare ground in your food plot, you'll likely find that's where weeds will gain a foothold."

Tillage also helps with weed control when performed properly. Most ground holds millions of dormant weed seeds. Tillage helps get the seedbed as stale — that is, free of competing weeds and dormant weed seeds — as possible so weed competition after planting is minimized. If you plan to plant a food plot in fallow ground, consider doing so in fall, and use the preceding spring and summer to control weeds. Specifically, till or disk the soil several times at two-week intervals during summer. That will bring dormant weed seeds to the surface, where they will germinate and then be killed when you till again two weeks later. In especially weedy ground, it can also help to stop tillage a few weeks earlier, allow weeds and grass to resume growing, and then spray a Roundup-type glyphosate herbicide before planting.

Each Whitetail Institute perennial also comes with a set of maintenance instructions, which should be performed each spring and summer. This includes periodic mowing to prevent upright annual weeds from producing viable seed. All Whitetail Institute perennials can also be sprayed with Arrest MAX to control grasses. You can use Whitetail Institute's Slay herbicide to control many sedges and broadleaf weeds in established stands of Imperial Whitetail Clover and other clovers or alfalfa.

We want our food plots to look as good as possible. The reasons, though, are much deeper than mere aesthetics. When lush, vigorously growing Whitetail Institute perennials occupy more of your food plot's surface and root space, you can be assured you have maximized the attractiveness, longevity and nutritional content of the stand.

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