

■ by Scott Bestul

# DOING THINGS RIGHT

A Wisconsin family proves solid management and long-term goals are worth the effort.

**B**randon Thome-Neitzel was in a quandary. He went into the 2020 Wisconsin archery season with his eyes on a 160-inch 10-point buck that would be his biggest whitetail with a bow. However, a monstrous 150-class 8-pointer regularly visited his Imperial Whitetail Clover food plot.

“I really had my sights set on that 10-point,” Thome-Neitzel said. “He was just under my skin, to the point that the first several hunts of the 2020 archery season, I passed shots on the 8-point as I waited for the 10 to give me a shot.”

Whether he recognized a classic bird-in-the-hand scenario or realized how great a deer the 8-pointer was, Thome-Neitzel eventually had a change of heart.

“The evening of Sept. 25, a full half-hour before quitting time, the big 8 came out in that clover plot like I’d watched him do so many times before,” he said. “This time, I had the bow in my hand, and when he gave me a standing shot at 55 yards, I took it and made a perfect shot.”

Thome-Neitzel clearly made the right decision in arrowing the buck. The Badger State giant topped the scales at 275 pounds (live weight) and pushed the 150-inch mark as an 8-pointer. Anyone familiar with Boone & Crockett scoring recognizes what it takes for a 4-by-4 to achieve that score.

Although a fantastic trophy in its own right, Thome-Neitzel’s buck served as an even more satisfying indicator of a management plan that had transformed a so-so property into a whitetail mecca.

## HISTORY

Wisconsin is noted for producing trophy-class bucks (it currently leads the Boone & Crockett and Pope & Young books in total entries) for years, but many of those mature animals came from a handful of counties. Adams County, in the central part of the Badger State, was not one of them.

“When my dad bought this property in the late 1980s, big bucks were not on our minds,” Thome-Neitzel said. “In fact, that first year, someone killed a spike buck, and they were in seventh heav-

en. They’d killed a buck on property Dad owned, and that was more than enough.”

For several years, the family enjoyed the property as it was, but as their knowledge about whitetails and their food and habitat needs increased, they began slowly transforming the acreage into a place that outperformed its origins.

“There was a time when a basket-racked 8-pointer was about as good as you could hope to do,” Thome-Neitzel said. “Then we just learned more and worked harder, and things started to turn around. The last five to 10 years, we have really noticed a big difference.”

As noted, the transformation of their parcel was not immediate, requiring significant investments of time, money and sweat equity. But the wait has been worth it. Here’s a look at some of the most significant steps the Thome-Neitzel crew has taken in turning a decent piece of deer ground into a whitetail paradise.

## FOOD PLOTS

Wisconsin sports some pretty fertile farmland, perfect for growing bounteous row crops or food plots. Unfortunately, the family acreage didn’t have that type of dirt.

“It’s pretty sandy soil,” Thome-Neitzel said. “We literally put in tons and tons of lime and fertilizer every year, trying to get the proper pH. And we soil-test every plot every year. It’s a lot of effort, but let’s face it, it’s garbage in, garbage out on pretty much anything related to deer and land management. Your rewards are the result of your efforts.”

The property has several food plots of varying sizes.

“We really try to offer deer a buffet of plantings,” Thome-Neitzel said. “I think it’s important to have a variety, because deer needs and preferences are changing all the time.”

Thome-Neitzel’s 2020 buck was a frequent visitor to an Imperial Whitetail Clover food plot, and he said the buck was not the first to exhibit such behavior. More important, he stressed, was the time of the season his hunt occurred.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BRANDON THOME-NEITZEL

**- BRANDON  
THOME-NEITZEL**  
credited Imperial Whitetail Clover as  
one reason for this Badger State giant.  
The buck topped the scales at 275  
pounds (live weight) and pushed the  
150-inch mark as an 8-pointer.





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### - IMPERIAL CLOVER PLOT ATTRACTS TROPHY

Here's Thome-Neitzel's monster buck standing in a field of Imperial Whitetail Clover.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BRANDON THOME-NEITZEL

“Almost everyone gets caught up in the excitement of the rut, but I’m convinced the best time of the fall to pattern and kill a mature buck is the early season,” he said. “Four of my best five bucks have all been tagged in September, in the first weeks of our season. In 2019, the buck I killed was in one of our plots 13 of the first 14 days of the opener, and always at or before the last half-hour of legal shooting. That’s what having a great early-season food source and hunting it carefully can do for you.”

### TIMBER MANAGEMENT

Like most savvy deer managers, the Thome-Neitzel family recognized quickly that attracting and holding whitetails meant managing their forest, too.

“We hired a consulting biologist — well actually a couple of different ones — to visit the property and make some recommendations,” Thome-Neitzel said. “One of those was to do some selective logging that would encourage whitetail habitat and also result in some profit. We had some really tall, mature trees and not a lot of understory to serve as deer cover.

“The primary tree species we had were oak, maple and some pine. Taking the advice of the consultants, we scheduled timber harvests in three years, to create a staggered effect. It really made a difference in the habitat on the property and was one of the best things we’ve done.”

The crew also plants trees, which has

helped the property.

“Each year, we buy about 600 trees and plant them on a weekend,” Thome-Neitzel said. “Some people think planting that many trees primarily for deer is a little extreme, but for us, it’s all part of the journey. It’s pretty neat seeing how the trees have grown over the years and the impact they’ve had. Sore hands are a small price to pay for having adequate food and cover for the coming years.”

### PONDS

Another critical element of the Thome-Neitzel management plan has been the installation of waterholes on the property.

“We have eight small ponds and one large one scattered across the place,” Thome-Neitzel said. “They’ve been a key to attracting and holding deer here. We have an archery stand by most of them, and they produce a lot of action for us.”

Thome-Neitzel said they typically construct a pond with a rented mini-excavator.

“We try to put them in places where the water flows naturally already,” he said. “We dig them just a few feet down and build up the sides, and then use a skid steer loader to smooth out a couple of spots so they can only enter from an area that presents a shot opportunity.”

To ensure the pond holds water, Thome-Neitzel stressed the need for a liner.

“We’ve experimented with Bentonite, which some guys have really good success with, but I don’t prefer it in this area,” he said. “Instead of forming a hard seal, it gets kind of mushy and goey. We’ve had better luck with heavy-duty rubber roof lining that we stretch across the bottom and then backfill over. My dad and I are in the heating and air conditioning business, and we know a lot of guys in construction. So I have a couple of guys keeping an eye out for sections of this we can get for cheap or free.”

### CONCLUSION

Although his group has enjoyed enviable success, Thome-Neitzel believes the keys to starting and maintaining a white-tail paradise are the desire and patience to create something better than what you had, combined with a continual willingness to learn.

“One of the first steps is just recogniz-



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ing that you don’t know as much as you think you do,” he said with a laugh. “We listened to the advice of other people who knew a lot about whitetails and their food and habitat needs. And like a lot of serious whitetail guys, we recognized that hunting is just one part of the year, and we’ve found doing the hard work the rest of the year is just as important — and actually a lot of fun.”

Finally, Thome-Neitzel emphasized the need for patience and setting realis-

tic long-term goals. “Everything is a work in progress,” he said. “If you’re expecting immediate results, or that the first thing you try is going to work, you might be disappointed. We’ve found the things that worked the best sometimes took a while. But when we look back at where we started, it’s a night-and-day difference from where we began.”



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