



WHAT A TREE NEEDS

Creating and keeping good timber stands isn't as simple as it seems. Ensure that your wildlife tree plantings have the necessities to survive and thrive.

■ by *Josh Honeycutt*

Trees serve vital roles in healthy whitetail habitat settings. Of course, trees have critical areas of life, including flowers, fruits, leaves, limbs, roots, stems, seeds and trunks. Making sure your trees are healthy within each area is crucial to planting, growing and maintaining quality stands of timber. Here are some things trees need.

STRONG ROOT SYSTEMS

Like other plants, trees gather and create food via photosynthesis, a process using energy derived from carbon dioxide, sunlight and water, which then converts into sugars. Water is carried up through the roots, and for a tree to thrive, it needs a strong root system. The larger and stronger the root system, the larger a canopy and greater mast production it can support.

So, land managers must do what they can to ensure a strong, healthy root system. Don't just look at the surface. Do what's possible to improve conditions above and below ground level.

ROOM TO THRIVE

A tree needs room for several things to grow. In addition to the root system, the shoots, leaves and trunk need space. Shoots emerge from the branches, develop buds and eventually flourish as leaves. After the leaves open, a new auxiliary bud is formed, and it often grows into new branches. This is the process through which canopies spread, and they need plenty of open space to do so.

Because of that, and so root systems don't compete, it's crucial to give trees enough room to grow. That permits plenty of space for emerging trees to establish, develop and thrive. Then, eventually, it will be a valuable resource for wildlife.

OPTIMIZED PLANNING

Every tree species is different, and each has specific site condition needs. There are many things to remember before planting new or promoting existing trees. In knowing what a tree species needs, the planning phase is crucial.



■ Trees that produce mast crops for wildlife or serve other purposes should be given priority when managing lands for hunting.

First are site considerations. As mentioned, a tree must have plenty of space above and below ground. It also needs adequate drainage, good soil pH, minimal disease threats, plenty of sunlight, proper soil type, water availability and weather compatibility. These are important boxes to check.

After site considerations, look at the specific concerns of each tree species. These include hardiness, heat tolerance, drought tolerance, growth rate, insect resistance, maturity size and more. And when selecting saplings at a nursery, remember certain factors, including selecting healthy trees without discolored bark, wilted leaves or insect concerns. Also, the trunk should properly taper upward, its

branches should be evenly spaced and its root system should be good.

PROPER PLANTING TECHNIQUES

A tree must be planted properly. Planting trees in fall is best practice, as it lets them develop root systems before dry, hot weather.

Site selection is important, too. The best areas to plant trees are in direct sunlight. Freshly planted saplings need full sunlight. Also, think about how you want deer and other wildlife to use and maneuver the property. Place trees along lines of movement (bed-to-feed travel patterns) in areas you can also hunt strategically.

When you've chosen a site, dig a hole

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about twice the diameter of the root ball. Remove trees and vegetation that compete with the performance of planted trees. Properly prepare the root ball for planting (this varies based on tree size and packaging type).

Then, set the tree in the hole, and make sure the depth is correct. The trunk flare should be visible just above ground level. After that's done, backfill around the tree with the original soil. There's no need to add additional soil or nutrients at that time. Placing mulch around the perimeter can help, but don't pack it around the trunk itself.

Use tree tubes or fencing to prevent animals from browsing down saplings or otherwise damaging them. Provide plenty of water, especially throughout the first year after planting, and during warmer, dryer spells. Refrain from fertilizing planted trees until 12 months or later after planting.

■ Most mature trees can easily withstand browsing pressure, but younger ones often cannot.



simple to keep alive. It's good to keep an eye on them, especially during the first few years of life. Trees need routine checkups. Keep an eye out for browse damage, insect invasion, lack of water, stunted growth and more. Remedy problems as needed. Overall, trees should be a percentage of every landown-

er's management plan. Consider planting them as part of a property's food source plan, but always remember what your trees need.

QUALITY MAINTENANCE

Trees are long-term projects that aren't planted-and-done tasks. And they aren't



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