

Lucky Charms

Courtesy of the National Wild Turkey Federation

A four-leaf clover has always been considered a sign of good luck. In 1620, Sir John Melton wrote: “If a man walking in the fields find any four-leaved grass, he shall, in a small while after, find some good thing.” For landowners, creating a pure stand of clover is a sign of good things to come. Clovers mean good hunting and a healthy herd for lucky hunters in the fall.

“Clover is inexpensive, hardy and relatively easy to maintain in a food plot,” Doug Little, NWTF Regional Biologist says. “Clover is not only beneficial to many species of wildlife, it is also good for the soil. It is easy to see why many wildlife managers and landowners incorporate clovers as part of their wildlife plan.”

Types of Clover

“Clovers commonly planted in food plots include white Dutch, crimson and several types of red clover,” Scott Vance, NWTF director of conservation field operations says. “The type of clover that is best for your food plot will depend on the application, type of wildlife you wish to attract, soil type and environment.”

Here are some of the characteristics of several species:

- 1) White Dutch clover (*Trifolium repens*)- Considered a perennial cool-season clover. It is a cold-tolerant species that grows to between eight and 12 inches tall. It grows best in poorly drained soil of moderate fertility with a pH range of 6.0 to 6.5.
- 2) Crimson clover (*Trifolium incarnatum*)-Considered an annual cool-season clover. It is a cold-tolerant species that grows up to 15 inches tall. It grows best in well-drained soil of moderate fertility with a pH range of 6.0 to 7.0.
- 3) Red clover (*Trifolium pratense*)-Considered a perennial cool-season clover. It is a cold-tolerant species that grows up to 10 inches tall. It grows best in poorly drained soil of moderate fertility with a pH range of 6.2 to 6.8.

Mow Over Clover

Why control weeds? Soil testing, lime application, seedbed preparation and fertilizing takes a great deal of time, effort and money. The last thing a landowner needs are weeds of little or no value stealing expensive resources from food plots.

“The key to maintaining perennial and annual clovers and controlling weeds lies in understanding clover growth characteristics,” Vance says. “The majority of the clover’s energy reserves are stored in the root system. If allowed to grow to maturity, clover will bloom and produce seed, expending much of its stored energy.”

Vance advises to occasionally mow down clover plots to about five inches. This will delay blooming and maturation and reduce weed competition. The best time to mow is when half of the clover begins to bloom and plants are about eight to 12 inches tall. This practice not only controls weeds, but also redirects nutrients and growth into new leaf and stem production. This new growth is both highly nutritious and very palatable for wildlife. As the clover matures and fills the plot



Clover photo courtesy of National Wild Turkey Federation

Benefits

Because many species of clover are available, they are highly adaptable for use in many soil types and environmental conditions. Some of the benefits of planting clover, according to Burhans, are:

- 1) Clover food plots attract many species of wildlife including white-tailed deer, wild turkeys and cottontail rabbits.
- 2) Clovers are legumes. Legumes improve the soil by adding nitrogen, an essential element for plant health.
- 3) Clover is a good source of protein (up to 30 percent crude protein), calcium, phosphorus and trace minerals for wildlife.
- 4) Clover attracts many insects that serve as food for ground-nesting birds such as quail and wild turkeys.
- 5) Once established, clover requires relatively minimal maintenance and can last several years before reseeding or plot rotation.

with more roots and stems, the weeds have less chance to compete.

“If a large number of broadleaf weeds invade the plot, then mow them down before they produce seed heads,” Vance says. “A regular schedule of mowing clover plots will eventually kill annual broadleaf weed species.” If the clover plot is relatively new and spotty in locations, it may help to very lightly disc the plot to stimulate the root system to multiply and spread. Chemical treatment may be necessary to eradicate stubborn perennial weeds.

Chemical Control

“Weed control also can be accomplished by spraying the food plot with herbicides that target grasses and certain broadleaf weeds in clover,” Little says. “The first step is identifying problem weeds.”

Little adds, “Clover is technically a broadleaf plant, so weed identification is very important for choosing the right herbicide. If identification is not possible, take a sample to a local wildlife biologist or one of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Service Centers for proper identification and advice.”

NWTF Planting Tips

- 1) Consult with a wildlife expert to find out which species of clover is best for the local soil type and wildlife application.
- 2) Test food plot soil and adjust fertilizing and liming accordingly.
- 3) Clovers can be planted as part of a mixture of seeds. Clovers are commonly planted with orchard grass, Timothy, wheat and oats. Mixing cool- and warm-season plants will create a more diverse habitat for wildlife and produce a year-round food source.

Here are some common weeds that cause problems for clover food plots: grasses including fescue, Bermudagrass, Johnsongrass, crabgrass, and foxtail; broadleaf plants such as pigweed, ragweed, horse nettle, thistle and milkweed.

Good Chemistry

Once landowners identify the problem species, the next step is choosing the right herbicide to control the problem. Herbicides for clover plots generally fall under three categories: broad spectrum, grass and broadleaf. Broad-spectrum herbicides such as glyphosate (trade name: RoundUp) are non-selective. Basically, they will kill grasses and broadleaf plants including clovers. Broad-spectrum herbicides are generally used in ground preparation or spot treatment of weeds. Users need to be careful when spraying glyphosate as the drift from this herbicide will injure or kill non-target plants.

A common herbicide to control grass is sethoxydim (trade names: Poast or Vantage). Sethoxydim is a systemic herbicide that prevents the grass from processing nutrients. When this herbicide is used, the weed ultimately starves to death.

A common herbicide to control broadleaf plants is dichlorophenoxyacetic acid or 2,4-DB. It is a systemic herbicide that affects the plant’s vascular system.

Landowners should adhere to dilution and application directions and wear appropriate safety gear when applying herbicides. Used properly, herbicide can effectively control weeds in clover plots and create a pure stand for wildlife purposes.

Worth the Effort

Maintaining a clover plot requires constant vigil and a little elbow grease. However, when properly maintained, a perennial clover plot will provide not only forage for deer, turkeys and small game, but also create great bugging and brood habitat for many gamebirds and songbirds

Harness the power of clover by planting one of the Turkey Gold Strut and Rut clover mixes. It is available through the NWTF’s Project HELP (Habitat Enhancement Land Program). To place an order or to receive a free catalog, call (800) THE-NWTF or visit the Turkey Shoppe on the NWTF’s Web site at www.nwtf.org.