“Controlling Weeds in Food Plots”

One of the favorite pastimes for many people in Tennessee is hunting. Many landowners, who wish to improve the nutrition which is available to the wildlife on their property, or who simply want to enhance wildlife viewing opportunities, will plant food plots which may consist of annual or perennial species. The ability to control weeds can be the difference in success or failure in establishing and maintaining food plots.

Weeds can be defined in a number of different ways, but perhaps the simplest is a plant growing where it is not wanted. For instance, tall fescue might be great if we are talking about a cow pasture, but its value as wildlife forage or habitat is very low and would probably be considered a weed in most food plots. If not controlled before planting, weeds can overtake a food plot before the seeds which were planted have a chance to grow.

Before planting a food plot, it is good to know what weeds might potentially be a problem. For instance, in a given plot is there a history of grass weeds such as crabgrass, foxtails, or bermudagrass, or are there more broadleaf weeds such as cocklebur, pigweed, or ragweed? Knowing what weeds are present will allow you to decide what herbicides might need to be used. You can then make planting decisions based on what your weed control strategy will be.

An integrated approach to weed control which includes cultivation, mowing, and herbicides will be the most effective line of attack. Cultivation such as plowing or disking is a good way to kill annual weeds. Field crops such as corn, sunflowers, and soybeans, can be planted in rows wide enough to allow for cultivation after crop emergence. This will allow the crop to get a head start and shade out the weeds.

If you have a perennial crop such as alfalfa or perennial clover, mowing is another effective means of removing weeds. Mowing will effectively reduce the number of annual weeds as long as it is done before the weeds go to seed. Mowing will stunt the growth of perennial weeds but will usually not kill them.

Herbicide applications will be needed in many situations. Herbicides may be applied before planting (preplant), after planting but before weed seed germination (preemergence), or after weeds have started growing (postemergence). The method used will depend on what weed seeds are in the seed bank, and what crop you are trying to grow. That is why determining what weeds are present before you plant is so important.

Weeds take up valuable space in your food plot and also rob nutrients and water from more desirable plants. Controlling weeds in food plots takes time and planning ahead. If you need help in identifying weeds or with herbicide recommendations, assistance is available free of charge through the local University of Tennessee Extension office. You can contact us at 931-946-2435, or stop by our office inside the Burritt College Building.