

In the Wake of Tree Planting

Tree planting is a risky business that represents a hope for the future and a promise of hard work. By now, the spring planting is largely done, or should be. While getting those seedlings in the ground is a significant accomplishment, there remains a lot of work to keep most of those trees alive.

Hopefully, the planting sites were properly prepared last year. Putting money and effort into killing vegetation goes a long way to ensuring a successful planting effort. Even so, follow-up control of competing vegetation will likely become necessary before the trees grow tall enough to fend for themselves.

Those seedlings are quite vulnerable. Overtopping grasses, herbs, and shrubbery can cast enough shade to kill young trees. If that competing vegetation is not removed, seedling mortality rates will climb. Vigilance is needed for the next five years or so. The idea is to provide the best conditions for not only survival but also rapid growth.

However, competition is not restricted to only sunlight. Underground, there is a battle for nutrients and water. The subterranean competition can be more important than the race for sunlight. Seedlings just don't fare well against most other plants.

In nature, trillions of tree seeds germinate each spring. Only a tiny fraction survives the first growing season. Maintained plantings greatly increase the odds of survival.

So, how can competing vegetation be dealt with? There are several options.

First, keep watch on the planted area. Each seedling should have a couple feet of mostly clear growing space all around. If site preparation was done well, there may not be any issues this year, or next year if luck reigns. If the majority of growing spaces look good, then sit back and watch those little trees grow.

If finding the seedlings is difficult, then a decision needs to be made. Either a lot of work will be needed or a high rate of mortality needs to be accepted. Assuming seedling survival is an important objective; then there are a couple ways to deal with the competing vegetation.

Herbicides are usually the easiest, cheapest, and most effective tool. Large plantations are treated aerially, but most of us don't plant with that economy of scale.

Alternatively, a backpack sprayer works well. The trick is not to spray the seedling, at least not while it is actively growing or, in the case of hardwoods, when leaves are present. Conifers can be sprayed after the annual growth is well set, usually at some point after Labor Day. Timing is related to the weather and weather is not uniform from year to year.

Competing vegetation can be removed with a weed-whacker, too. This is more work. Unless a high state of vigilance is maintained, some of the seedlings will fall victim to the weed-whacker. This technique is a lot easier when the seedlings can still be seen. If the competing vegetation overtops the seedling, then hunting and pecking with a weed-whacker becomes quite frustrating.

Removing competing vegetation before planting is generally a lot easier than after the seedlings are planted.

Much of the annual growth occurs in the first half of the growing season. This is the time when seedlings need space, both above-ground and underground, in order to optimize the growing potential for the year.

Of course, there is little that can be done about summer weather conditions. Excessively dry or wet seasons can doom the best of efforts. We have had a good growing season so far. That means the conditions are good for weeds, too.

Similarly in many areas across the Lake States, deer browsing can also wipe out the best implemented plantation. Sometimes, there are techniques to deal with this threat, but keeping trees growing as fast as possible is important to all of them.

If you planted trees this spring, we're off to a good start. If you did good site preparation last year, the trees should be in good shape for this year. Monitor the growing spaces. Chances are some competition control will be needed for next year. This fall may be the best time for the control work.

If you're working with a professional forester, then expertise is readily available. If not, then information gathering may take a bit more energy, but can be done. The act of planting trees is not the end of the story. The fruits of that labor will require more labor. However, a high level of satisfaction can be anticipated a few years down the road.

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*As an MSU Extension forester, I provide educational programming for the entire Upper Peninsula. My office is located at the MSU Forest Biomass Innovation Center near Escanaba. The Center is the headquarters for three MSU Forestry properties in the U.P., with a combined area of about 8,000 acres. A collection of these newspaper articles, back to July 1997, can be viewed on the following website: <http://michigansaf.org/ForestInfo/Newspaper/0000-Directory.htm> or under the "Forest Info" button of <http://michigansaf.org>.*

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*Bill Cook, Forester & Biologist  
MSU Extension, Upper Peninsula  
6005 J Road  
Escanaba, MI 49829  
906-786-1575, voice  
906-786-9370, fax  
Email: [cookwi@msu.edu](mailto:cookwi@msu.edu)*