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I receive more and more calls each year from landowners inquiring about their seedlings having a “funny” look or appearing to look like “little bushes.” Inevitably, after investigating the claims, I find that one of two culprits is at work. I have already discussed one of the primary villains, the [Nantucket Pine Tip Moth](#), in a TreeLines article a while back. Now let’s talk about the other one. DEER! Officially Whitetail Deer.

Forest landowners, you’re not alone in this. You’re now part of a growing community of landowners who are grappling with the same issue. I’ve personally witnessed, documented, and confirmed that deer are now preying on newly planted pine seedlings, primarily due to a lack of natural browse availability. If you’ve planted seedlings within the last few years, you can attest that they are some of the most expensive deer food available.

Not long after joining ArborGen as the Reforestation Advisor in Mississippi and Alabama, I was called to investigate a situation where the seedlings just disappeared. Upon arriving, the forester informed me that both our seedlings and one of our competitor’s seedlings were planted on the tract, and both were impacted equally. After analyzing the clearcut and adjacent stands that consisted of immature overstocked pines and mature unburned thinned stands, I noticed the presence of deer tracks.

It was clear that the local deer gang had devoured all the seedlings. This planting would be a complete failure, and even with appropriate actions, I couldn’t promise that the replant wouldn’t yield the same results.



MCP® Select seedling trying to gain height growth but unable to due to deer browsing on the newly emerging buds in the spring. This seedling is beginning its 2nd growing season and should already be over 2 feet tall. It will continue to be stunted unless the deer move on to new, more preferred browsing, such as Greenbrier.

We know the problem, but that lends us to the question: “What on Earth can we do about it?”. Several options exist to protect your newly planted forest from these eating machines. Here are a few:

1. **Lower your planting density** and plant a **better genetic**. Fewer trees per acre result in more sunlight reaching the forest floor, thus resulting in more native browse for the deer to eat. Let’s face it: pine trees taste horrible, and if the deer have another option, they will take it. However, planting better genetics seedling will ensure the seedlings grow into a higher-quality product.
2. **Hold back on your site prep chemical** on all or a portion of your project. This delay will allow more browse to establish and entice the deer toward a better-tasting browse.
3. **Manage your adjacent stands** with a multi-goal approach. Thin your mid-rotation overstocked stands and then follow with routine understory-controlled fire. This process will keep the browse low enough for the deer to forage, and you will also improve your turkey and quail habitat.
4. **Shoot more deer**. As a deer hunter, I know we all want to harvest that buck of a lifetime, and we know it takes three things to produce them: nutrition, genetics, and age. However, we will only be able to grow that buck if we provide enough high-quality nutritional forage they need. I remember a term I learned at Mississippi State University: carrying capacity. For example, let’s say 50 hungry family members show up for Thanksgiving, but you only have one turkey. You’ve exceeded your carrying capacity. It’s the same thing for deer. The herd’s health will soon decline if you have too many deer per acre and need more food

Most landowners today manage multiple objectives, most of which consist of timber income and recreation. Both these goals can be achievable; it just takes some planning. If you need assistance developing a plan for timber income and improving wildlife habitat, always use a professional forestry consultant. We also recommend that you consult with a professional wildlife biologist for guidance in improving wildlife habitat for game and non-game species.



Greenbrier growing next to the impacted MCP® seedlings showing excessive browse from deer. This is one of the Whitetail’s preferred plants, which is evident in the photo.



Adjacent overstocked precommercial pine stand that has shaded out the understory where the preferred deer food would have been growing.



Deer travel corridors are usually easily identifiable, as is evident in this photo, which shows the deer passing by the seedlings in the earlier pictures and the Greenbrier.

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