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Japanese stiltgrass management for woodland owners

Japanese stiltgrass is becoming widely known for the environmental damage it is causing to our native woodlands. In fact there are so many dire implications from invasion of our woodlands by *Microstegium* that it has become one of the most widely studied invasive plants in the Nation. Most of the studies and research findings will take years before they filter down to the general public. For woodland owners wanting to gain some control over the spread of stiltgrass within their property there are a few steps worth taking.

Road and ditch line maintenance:

Usually, the first place that Japanese stiltgrass shows up on most properties is along a road side, on an ATV trail, a gas well service road, a logging trail or a log landing. To slow the spread into your woods the most important part of working against stiltgrass is to prevent the plant going to seed. Herbicides can be effective but they should be carefully selected and very carefully applied to ensure that the timing is ideal to achieve maximum destruction of the stiltgrass. Mechanical treatment with a brush hog or weed whacker is best done between mid August and the first two weeks of September. If you choose to mechanically treat stiltgrass the grass should be cut as closely to the ground as possible to prevent regrowth. Any kind of mowing done before the middle of August is likely to be totally ineffective and not reduce seed production.

Often stiltgrass gets a very good start in the interior of woodland and can be present for several years before it is even noticed. Because the seed of stiltgrass is so small and easily moved by water it is often found along stream courses. After mowing the ditch lines it would be advisable to specifically check the outflow and downslope location of every culvert and waterbar.

To locate early invasions of stiltgrass near drainage ways and culverts you have to look below the culvert or waterbar outlet at the first place the surface water flow slows and debris washed out of the water bar and culvert collects. On steeper terrain this can be over 100 feet below the road. A small patch of stiltgrass just a few feet across can spread to cover several acres in just a few growing seasons but can easily be hand pulled and destroyed in late July or early August and rechecked in early September. Catching an early stage invasion before a seed bank has had time to develop and removing immature plants is one of the most cost effective methods of natural control for stiltgrass.

Deer trails and intersections:

Deer have long been recognized as vectors for spreading some of our worst invasive species including Japanese stiltgrass. When mowing your roads and trails make a specific effort to notice the locations where game trails cross your maintained trails.

Often, if there is stiltgrass present on the property edges the deer will spread it into the woods from the ditches with their hooves as they cross the road. In the early stages of a stiltgrass invasion seedlings might stop within 10 feet of the edge of the road and be just a few inches wider than the disturbed track of their trail.

Within-the-woods intersections of every kind can become very effective places for a stiltgrass invasion to spread from. These could be just a spot where two ATV trails or truck roads come together and the ground is torn up from normal use. Any place where recreational or forest management equipment is likely to stop, linger or be parked is a possible stiltgrass invasion site. It is not uncommon to encounter an early stage Japanese stiltgrass invasion established hundreds or even thousands of feet from other populations and all it takes is a sloughed clod of mud to start a patch of stiltgrass. Also, if you have ATV trails on your property; stiltgrass can get a very good start on the first few feet of a steep, rocky trail where mud is shaken from the ATV. Walking any regularly used ATV trails during July looking for patches of stiltgrass along the track and hand pulling before seed set can be very effective and extremely inexpensive way to keep your recreational trails clean.

Deer trails, deer beds and food plots:

Many woodland owners have put in substantial efforts toward developing food plots to attract deer to specific parts of their property. Because stiltgrass grows to be so tall prior to going to seed and produces such a thick thatch that can be soft and comfortable to lie on, deer will often choose to take shelter in brushy areas with a stiltgrass ground cover. Because of the sticky, barbed nature of stiltgrass seeds, they become easily embedded in the coat of the deer as they lay in the mature thatch only to be shed by the deer everywhere they walk, jump or flex their skin.

To get an idea of how readily deer use stiltgrass for cover or bedding just take a walk through a stiltgrass infested logging trail in late July. During midsummer, deer will readily seek out the smooth flat location of stiltgrass infested logging trails to bed down or rest. Once the stiltgrass dies back later in the growing season they abandon bedding spots in the middle of the trails for more secure locations with better cover.

Limiting the resting areas for deer adjacent to food plots, apple trees or meadows that are infested with stiltgrass will limit the opportunity for spread in this manner. If a woodland owner has a few mature apple trees where deer congregate each fall, specific mowing to prevent stiltgrass from going to seed might be an extremely appropriate action. Deer will often lie beneath apple trees waiting for the fruit to fall, especially if they are in a location where they are likely to not be disturbed. If stiltgrass matures and goes to seed beneath apple trees, the deer will punch the ground to oblivion looking for apples among the seed producing stiltgrass plants. In addition to picking up seed in their coats from lying on the stiltgrass, their hooves will track seed a good distance from where they eat.

Mowing or treating stiltgrass infestations within site or easy access to a maintained food plot can be quite effective at slowing the spread of stiltgrass and knocking down mature plants, even as they go to seed will help limit the amount of stiltgrass seed that can potentially get stuck in the deer hair.

Control of Japanese stiltgrass is possible with annual diligence and worth the effort if a diverse understory, vibrant wildlife habitat and natural regeneration are any of your forest management objectives.