

Plastic Tubes Protect Tomorrow's Deer Habitat From Today's Deer

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Unfortunately, deer don't understand that the oak, crabapple, hawthorn and other trees landowners plant today will someday provide food for generations of deer... Too often landowners' well-intended efforts to plant trees to enhance wildlife habitat end in failure and frustration as browsing deer decimate seedlings. Many landowners replant seedlings year after year, with little or nothing to show for their time and expense. Many others simply give up on tree planting altogether.

One Minnesota company says it has an answer. Joe Lais, CEO of Plantra, Inc., introduced cylindrical, translucent tree tubes to the USA nearly 20 years ago, and has been improving the design and reducing the cost of the concept ever since. A deceptively simple solution, these plastic "treeshelters" are helping tree planters and land managers achieve success in the face of increased deer pressure.

Tree tubes are 3.5 to 4 inch diameter cylinders of specially tinted plastic, which protect trees from the triad of threats that Lais refers to as, "The three W's: wildlife, wind and weeds." A four or five foot tall tree tube will act as a physical barrier and can be placed over a newly planted 6 to 36 inch seedling.

Lais sees Plantra's mission in terms of taking the element of chance and luck out of tree establishment. "The odds against the survival of an individual seedling in a wild setting are astronomical – and they are getting worse," Lais says. "The mature oaks we have today got started in a very different world, with a tiny fraction of the deer population compared to now, with fewer exotic and invasive plants competing for nutrients and moisture, and with periodic fires to kill competing plants and give the oaks a competitive edge. What we're doing is essentially giving today's seedlings the same advantages, along with the added advantage of reducing moisture stress for faster growth."

While tree tubes add to the up-front cost of tree planting, users find that they reduce the total cost of successful tree establishment – in terms of money, time and frustration. "People often ask us, 'Why should I use a two or three dollar tree tube on a 50 cent tree?' And the answer we what we tell them is, 'Because 50 cents is just the cost of the tree, it's not the cost of establishing that tree.' One way or other landowners spend five to seven dollars per successfully established tree – and the less the landowner spends up front the more he ends up spending in the long run. Compared to the cost of the seedling, tree tubes seem expensive. But compared to the true cost of successful tree establishment we save people money." For landowners who remember the high cost of earlier tree tube versions, Lais says they are in for a pleasant surprise. "We make millions of tubes for vineyard and orchard applications, so our high volumes keep our production costs very low."

While clearly thrilled with the acceptance of treeshelters as a management tool, there is one thing that Lais would change. "Landowners usually find us after they have had one or more planting failures. I just wish folks would call us the first time they plant. We could make the experience so much more enjoyable and successful. Who has time to waste on failed plantings? None of us is getting any younger," he says with a smile.