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Corn-meister tips

Key Points

- Jim Hershey tops contenders with a 230-bushel average.
- No-till has lowered his corn production costs, raised yields.
- Running on wet soils is corn's biggest yield-killer.

By JOHN VOGEL

AFTER August's sapsucking dry spell, Jim Hershey knew it: "This year, my corn isn't going to win any yield contest." The reigning Pennsylvania Five-acre Corn Club champion knows great corn yield potential can quickly melt down to average yields — about 170 bushels an acre on his 600-acre operation.

Last year, the Elizabethtown, Pa., producer turned in a contest entry of 223 bushels per acre with a harvest plant population of 31,861. That was good enough for third place in the no-till category. His three-year average of 230.3 bushels topped all no-till and conventional corn entries.

American Agriculturist caught up with Hershey in the midst of this fall's harvest to query him on best corn growing practices. Consistent high yields are the one thing that stands out. The lowest of his three-year contest entries was 223 bushels.

Reasons for consistency

Having good, well-drained Lancaster County soils certainly helps. Following his nutrient management plan for utilizing manure from 550,000 broilers and 6,400 finished hogs a year also helps.

But "I've been really impressed with no-till," says the Pennsylvania Corn Growers' president. "It has lowered my production costs and increased our yields." It's also given Hershey Farms more time to



CORN CHAMP: Jim Hershey's no-till success has topped conventional yields over the past three years.

custom plant and harvest close to 1,500 acres.

"Now that no-till is established, the ground is firmer

and we can plant earlier," he says. He's so strong an advocate that he's vice president of Pennsylvania No-till Alliance.

His early planted and mid-season corn seemed to do best this year. "Our soils are getting warmer in the spring; fall is

coming sooner, too," he says. Planting earlier doesn't seem to hurt hybrids like it used to, observes Hershey. April 10 is his target for early planting.

"The genetics in some of today's hybrids can handle colder soils," he notes.

Seed treatments also cut the associated risks. He used Poncho 250 on first-year corn after soybeans and Poncho 1250 on corn following corn.

"We also tried some Herculex corn this year, but haven't shelled it yet. I'm hoping standability issues brought on by August's drought stress will be less with that corn," Hershey says.

Yield-boosting pointers

Here are a few pointers pulled from the interview:

■ Stay off soils that are too wet. "Soil compaction is the biggest yield-killer."

■ Crop residue management is important, "especially with no-till." Knives on his combine header help break up stalks for even and wide distribution out the back. "Concentrated residues [piles] contribute to soils not drying down evenly in the spring."

■ Don't be afraid to try new ideas. Hybrid technology offers more convenience than cost savings, contends this farmer. "Use only what you need; it carries the opportunity to increase yields and, hopefully, profits."

■ Vertical tillage may be a good fit, especially for farms using livestock manure. "I use [turbo-till] for custom farming. I see [vertical tillage] as a transition tool to no-till. It's better than dragging a disk across the field for manure incorporation." (See story on Page 14 of October's issue.)

■ Check out the newest corn-trait stacks on Page 14.

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