

Crops

Ancient grain gets new life

By LON TONNESON

WADE into the waist-high wheat growing on Lewis Seibold's farm, and you might imagine that you see the great pyramids of Egypt in the distance.

Seibold grew 70 acres of emmer last year. It's an ancient awned wheat that dates back to approximately 7,700 B.C. It was popular in Egypt during the time of the pharaohs. Today, emmer has nearly disappeared from modern agriculture. It is only considered a major crop in Ethiopia, and is a minor crop in India and Italy.

But Seibold, Cathay, N.D., grew 70 acres of organic emmer last year.

"It yielded pretty well," he says. "About 2,000 pounds an acre."

A spring grain, emmer competes well with weeds without the use of herbicides. It has some tolerance to modern small-grain diseases and is adapted to many different growing conditions.

Seibold and two other members of the Northern Plains Sustainable Agricultural Society's Farmer-Breeder Club are looking at various markets for their production. Specialty bakers on the East and West coasts, and local and regional buyers and millers have expressed interest.

"Before, if somebody called and wanted a container or semi-load, we didn't have it. Now, we do," Seibold says.

But it isn't just the potential market that interests Seibold. There is some satisfaction in growing a grain that sustained an ancient civilization.

"Emmer has been around for a long time," he says. "It

Key Points

- North Dakota farmers raise emmer, an ancient grain.
- Emmer dates back to the time of the Egyptian pharaohs.
- Farmers hope to preserve the past and find a modern market.

is important to save it for the future."

Other ancient grains

Steve Zwinger, a North Dakota State University research specialist at Carrington, has been collecting seed from ancient grains. He plants some of the seed to evaluate the grain and increase the amount of seed.

"Most of the emmer cultivars we work with in the Northern Great Plains are seeds our forefathers brought to this country. The varieties don't have names, but are generally called 'land races,'" he says.

Einkorn was one of the earliest cultivated wheats. Seeds have been found in sites dating back to 8,000 B.C. Like other ancient grains, einkorn has very tight husks that have to be mechanically stripped before the milling process can begin. There is anecdotal evidence that the proteins in einkorn and other ancient grains may not provoke such extreme allergic reactions in sufferers of wheat intolerance as modern wheat proteins do. Plant breeders believe einkorn and a wild grass crossed to produce emmer.

Spelt is another heirloom grain. It was an important staple in Europe from the Bronze Age to medieval times and was once the principal wheat species in southern Germany and Britain. Spelt is often referred to as Roman wheat, given its



ANCIENT GRAIN: Lewis Seibold inspects a field of emmer, an ancient wheat that has almost disappeared from modern agriculture. He and several other members of the Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society's Farmer-Breeder Club grew emmer commercially last year in hopes of supplying a specialty market.

frequent discovery in Roman burial sites.

The germplasm from ancient grains may help improve modern grains.

New markets may be found for some of these ancient grains because of their unique nutritional properties and the interest in alternative flours.

If you have old seed samples, contact Zwinger at 701-652-2951 or Steve.Zwinger@ndsu.edu.

Plains Farmer-Breeder Club evaluates alternative grains

THE Northern Plains Sustainable Agriculture Society's Farmer-Breeder Club is a group of producers who work with plant breeders, researchers, Extension specialists and seed professionals to evaluate lines and varieties in organic production systems.

Organized in 1999, the club has been active in exploring alternative methods of seed development for organic agriculture. The questions raised by the farmers that led to the group's formation dealt mainly with the availability and suitability of crop varieties, and the desirable traits needed in varieties for organic systems. The club's main efforts have focused on variety evaluation and seed increase.

In 2008, the members grew spring wheat, field pea, emmer and potato varieties in certified organic fields in cooperation with the North Dakota State University Carrington Research Extension Center. Seed increase included a hard red spring wheat release by the club, FBC Dylan, and emmer for seed production and for market evaluation.

To learn more about the FBC, contact NPSAS at 701-883-4304 or slnpsas@drtel.net. — Lon Tonneson

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