

CROPS

Corn-soybean farmers are sold on cover crops



Dan DeSutter — Indiana

ATTICA, Ind., farmer Dan DeSutter farms 4,300 acres. Many of his farms have been in continuous no-till for 28 years. For the past three years, he's been virtually all continuous corn.

His work with cover crops began in the late 1990s with annual ryegrass. DeSutter initially planted rye as a favor to a Purdue University professor. A couple of years later, he noticed a clogged tile line in the field in early April. After digging it up, he noticed the rye roots were 4 feet deep, with just a few inches of top growth.

"Soon after that, I sold my ripper," he adds.

His program still uses ryegrass, though he now primarily uses cereal rye. It doesn't root quite as deep as annual rye, but he says it survives the winter more consistently. Along with cereal rye, DeSutter favors oilseed radish and crimson clover.

In the 20-plus years he's been no-tilling — the last 10 with cover crops — his organic matter has increased from 2% to 4%. Every 1% of organic matter is worth 1,000 pounds of nitrogen in the top 12 inches of soil, he says. It's easy to see why continuous corn continues to perform admirably on his farm.

Dave Brandt — Ohio

CARROLL, Ohio, farmer Dave Brandt went no-till in 1971. In 1978, he jumped into cover crops. Today, he plants cover crops on 98% of his 900 acres.

In those early days, his soil was a yellowish clay. Test results confirmed a paltry 0.5% organic matter in 1971. Fast-forward to 2011. His soil is as black as any found in central Illinois. Organic matter has jumped to 5.5%. Recently, a Natural Resources Conservation Service soil scientist was completely boggled on how to classify a soil that has changed so dramatically.

Brandt's program also centers around different varieties of ryegrass. He seeds with a 15-inch row planter. His 2011 soybean crop, planted June 9 after the rye came off, averaged 72 bushels.

While some like to pile on cover crops, Brandt is a believer that thinner is better. "I wouldn't make a good seed salesman, because I think thinner is usually better," he says. "The thinnest wheat crop you've ever seen is about the thickest rye stand you want."

Brandt also uses hairy vetch on his farm. He likes to put it on 20% slopes, where it does an excellent job of holding nitrogen through the winter.



Steve Berger — Iowa

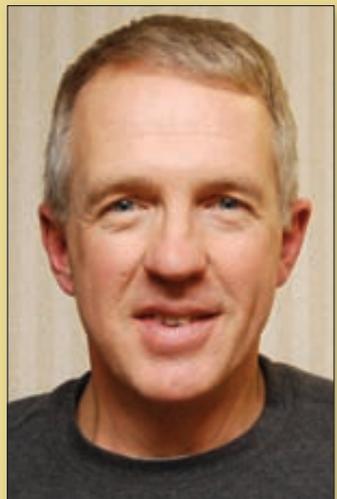
IOWA farmer Steve Berger seeds nearly 90% of his 2,200 acres to cereal rye in the off-season.

Berger became a convert when he noticed a yield boost on ground where there used to be a fencerow. "We'd rent a farm that was right next to one of our existing farms," he remembers. "After we tore out the fence, we'd notice a 20-bushel jump on that little strip."

To spread that yield boost across his entire farm, which is near Wellman, Berger figured the answer was cover crops. He follows the combine with the drill at harvest. He follows the drill with a manure spreader. If harvest runs late, he calls in the planes to fly on rye seed.

Near the end of March and the beginning of April, Berger uses an ATV and pull-type sprayer to burn down the rye. He starts planting corn on April 20 with 60 pounds of starter nitrogen. He follows that with another 20 to 30 pounds of N at sidedress.

Over the years, he's definitely seen yield increases on his corn crop. It's all about returning the ground to its natural, highly productive state, he notes.



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