Ag scientists shape future

Since last year, I’ve had numerous opportunities to attend meetings, visit with scientists and tour company research sites and laboratories. I’ve been impressed with what I have seen:

- University of Minnesota’s new Plant Pathology Biosafety Level (BL3) laboratory and greenhouse, to be dedicated in early November, will enable scientists to conduct research on contagious pathogens that cause soybean and wheat stem rusts, sudden oak death and other deadly plant diseases. The BL3 is a golden feather in U-M’s cap and should lead to international plant pathogen research prominence.

- Seed companies are identifying genes faster, thanks to innovative equipment and DNA markers. Monsanto developed its own soybean seed chipper and system that takes a nick out of each seed, pulverizes it and checks the seed’s DNA. Then the system sorts the seeds, based on the traits for which the scientists are screening. Before, scientists planted all seeds and took plant tissue samples at two weeks to determine DNA.

- Drought tolerance in corn is coming, maybe as early as 2011-12. One company found that taking a trait from a mustard plant helps with water-use efficiency. Another company identified a gene in moss as drought tolerant and transferred that into corn. And cold tolerance in corn, allowing growers to plant a full week early, might be available at the same time as drought tolerance.

- Companies are investing heavily in agricultural research to meet the challenges of providing food, feed, fiber and energy. The CEO of BASF Plant Science told us at a meeting in Olivia that the efficiency of agriculture must double worldwide over the next 20 years to provide for the world’s more than 6 billion people.

Many of the scientists I have met at these businesses and the university are passionate about what they do, and they are proud of their contributions to agriculture. They have long-term goals and a vision of where agriculture could be in 20 years and beyond. It’s an exciting time for young people who show strong skills in science and technology.

Now Available Just Up the Row.

A time for thanks

As you settle down to read this issue, Thanksgiving is just over a week away. By now, weather permitting, crop harvest is done, and we’re waiting for those first flakes to flutter.

Again, there is much that I am thankful for as I reflect on this past year. Family, friends and good health top the list. We have celebrated 50th birthdays, a marriage and children thriving in school, music and sports. I’m especially thankful for modern medicine. Last spring, I underwent surgery for total hip replacement No. 2. The operation and ensuing results are close to miraculous, in my humble opinion.

We also look back on the challenges and sadness we’ve faced since a year ago. Family and friends who have been affected by terminal illness, cancer and death are in our hearts and in our prayers. While we can’t take away their pain, we can show we care by being there with them as they make their journey toward healing and acceptance.

May your Thanksgiving holiday be restful and satisfying.