

Flint on Crops: We Often Ignore Important Things - Commentary

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Through the years since I started working with farmers in the mid 1970's there has been a growing awareness of how many producers choose to bypass or intentionally ignore some of the most basic things that could increase their yields and profitability.

Later when I joined the Extension Service and it became my job to bring these principles to their attention I was even more surprised at how some people will actually get pretty good at doing these things that in many cases are fairly simple or even passive and some don't cost anything because most of the time they produce more value than the cost.

I want to mention just a few of these things just for the record so at least some of them will be talked about together.

The first of these, as you might expect, is soil quality, including soil pH, a good soil testing program, and the additional principles that have become more apparent in recent years including crop rotation, cover crops, reduced and fall tillage, and as always that important thing called drainage. All of these when addressed well come together to make some of the most successful farmers I have known, and all they have to do is take care of the land first and then it takes care of them.

Next is something that a lot of people would rather not even hear me talk about, especially the seed salesmen. Most farmers plant way too many seed. This is especially true for soybeans and cotton. We do a pretty good job with corn because of the excellent work that has been done with populations in that crop. However with soybeans most people plant around 130,000 or more seed per acre, and in some cases a lot more than that.

Most of the "real world" trials that have been done show that seeding rates in the 100,000 range are sufficient even when emergence is not ideal and the final populations drop as low as around 70,000. In fields with lower populations there are normally fewer issues with insects and diseases since sunlight is able to enter the canopy more readily, and these populations can endure drought stress better than the higher densities.

Another one is that so many people treat sub-economic numbers of pests, often destroying most of the native predators that can help suppress the problem pests and save a lot of investment in money and time. This is especially true for cotton, but soybeans as well. In recent years I have seen some of the more conservative cotton producers achieve some of the highest yields without treating for insects very much at all except for thrips at emergence.

As for soybeans, the entry of the RBSB has changed the scenario dramatically and growers have been forced to spray more, but any and all applications should be based on sound scouting data.

Finally, one of the most overlooked things of all is the importance of managing nematodes. Both cotton and soybeans are extremely vulnerable to these invisible pests that can make a field of cotton or soybeans produce half or less of its potential. Reniform, root knot, and for soybeans the old enemy cyst is slowly returning to our fields after being wiped out by a disease around 20 years ago.

Many North Mississippi fields already experience yield losses in the 30 to 50 percent range from cyst and sometimes there are multiple species present. Crop rotation can help as well as the planting of non-host cover crops like wheat.

A fairly new development in this subject is the introduction of a chitosan based material called Nemasan which when applied correctly can decimate nematodes within a few days of application, allowing crops to then form better roots, use nutrients and water more efficiently, and yield as they should.

This material has not been highly publicized by the media and it has been slowly accepted. It is more commonly used in other parts of the South and in both agronomic and horticultural crops. And I almost forgot to say it is safe for those working with it and for the environment unlike some of the older product that are so dangerous.

Just a few basic changes can bring a farm from red ink into the black, but these things are all too often passed over in favor of work with other things that seem more demanding on the immediate situation. Maybe it's time to go back and make sure these basics are being managed properly.

Thanks for your time.