

Field Notes:

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It's time to plant winter cereal grains.

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Even though many livestock producers have already planted their cool season forage crops the time is just now getting about right to plant those fields of wheat, oats, triticale, or rye that are intended for grain production. The reason we wait a little longer to plant these grain fields is that we want to avoid problems with insects and diseases and to delay spring pollination beyond the usual frost dates.

Every year is different of course, but if I had to pick a date for planting wheat it would be around the middle of November. At this time we normally still have some daytime temperatures that are good for germinating seed and allowing seedlings to develop healthy roots.

The preferred method for planting cereal grains is by drilling the seed on a standard 7 to 8 inch width spacing to a depth of 1 to 1.5 inch into moist but not wet soil. When soil clings to the press wheels of the drill the soil is likely too wet. The seed should be covered with soil in order to avoid their coming into contact with herbicides that may be applied since most of the pre-emergence type herbicides work by inhibiting germination of weed seed and may have a similar effect on the wheat.

With most wheat varieties the seeding rate will be around 100 pounds per acre in order to arrive at the desired 25 to 30 seedlings per square foot. The seeding rate can be reduced somewhat when soil conditions are excellent, but when the field is rough the rate should probably be increased somewhat. Although I prefer to plant without disturbing the soil I realize that some weed species like ryegrass can be better managed with a light tillage operation prior to seeding. When the crop is planted without tillage a burndown product should be applied prior to planting.

Weed control is probably the most difficult part of growing wheat in this region. Our main weed problems in wheat and other cereals is ryegrass. It can often reach levels of competition sufficient to lodge the entire field and when the crop is harvested the dockage at the elevator may be excessive. The best way to prevent the ryegrass problem along with many other weeds is to apply a pre-emergence herbicide like Zidua, Axiom, or metribuzin. Even when these are used the field should be scouted for onions and garlic in spring and treated with either Harmony or 2,4-D if they are found.

Soil pH should be above 6.0, and sufficient P and K should be applied to supply the needs of the wheat yield you expect to achieve. A fall application may not be required following most good crops of cotton, corn, or soybeans, however the soil should be sampled and tested to accurately select the fertilizer product for spring application. Sulfur is also needed for wheat at around 12 to 15 pounds of actual sulfur preferably in the form of sulfate as from ammonium sulfate.

Variety selection is a very important part of growing the crop. Most suppliers only have a few varieties to choose from so the best thing to do is to talk to the supplier and then refer to the MAFES Wheat and Oat variety trials to make the best selection. Another good method is to plant a variety that has been proven in the area.

Our wheat can produce yields equal to or better here than anywhere in the nation. The key is good management. Disease management is an important way to maximize yields when other practices are done correctly. At least one application of fungicide may be needed and probably should be budgeted. Timing of nitrogen is also critical, keeping in mind that around 2 pounds of N are needed to produce a bushel of wheat.

I certainly can't guess what the price of wheat may be next spring, but I do know that if you don't plant it you won't have any to sell. Wheat is good for the land and good for cash flow when nothing else is moving in the market.

Thanks for your time.