

Practical oat production tips

By TOMOKO OGAWA

AT Practical Farmers of Iowa's annual conference in January, farmer Dan Wilson and grain merchandiser Sam Raser teamed up for Practical Oat Production 101 — a discussion about producing oats and current market trends. About 70 people attended the session and had many questions, indicating a

increasing interest in growing oats in Iowa.

Wilson farms with his family near Paullina in northwest Iowa and raises a diversity of crops and livestock organically. He grows small grains (about 100 acres of them) every year. Most of the small grains he grows are fed to dairy cows and sows; he likes growing succotash (mixture of oats, wheat, barley) for that purpose.

Sam Raser is a grain merchandiser

for Grain Millers Inc. Raser has worked with the firm for six years, with a focus on specialty grains. Grain Millers is the world's largest organic oat processor and North America's second-largest overall with three mills in the U.S. and Canada, including St. Ansgar, Iowa; Eugene, Ore.; and Yorkton, Saskatchewan.

The most important consideration in growing oats is planting time. Early

planting is important for optimal yields and higher quality when growing oats in Iowa, as oats prefer cooler temperatures. Wilson recommends planting between March 25 and April 10 in southern Iowa, and by April 20 in northern Iowa.

Pick best variety for location

It's crucial to choose the right variety best-suited for your location. In deciding which to plant, test weight is the most common indicator to consider for marketing oat grain. The target test weight that Grain Millers looks for is 40 pounds per bushel; the minimum it would accept is 36 pounds. When oats arrive, a sample is tested for moisture, infestations, detectable levels of pesticide, chemicals or odors. Only once the tests are passed can a semitruck unload the grain.

Raser said, "For milling oats there are several varieties recommended for Iowa farmers because of high grain yields, test weights and resistance to diseases. These varieties include Badger, Colt, Sabers, Spurs, Tack, Excel, Shelby 427, Souris, Horsepower, HIFI, Rockford and Newburg."

After successfully growing and harvesting oats, another challenge awaits: finding a market to sell. There are increasing options for marketing oats with rising demand for alternative rations and niche animal feed, and expanding milling capacity in some areas. Raser stressed, "These are not your grandfathers' oats. Do not treat them like a commodity crop but instead as an ingredient; a specialty crop with a specific purpose in mind."

If your oat crops do not reach food-grade quality, Wilson recommended, "It is always good to have a backup plan, such as cutting the crop for hay, marketing as feed-grade grain or grazing."

Travel woes

A major obstacle for Grain Millers is getting enough oats for milling, as trains are increasingly locked for transporting oil. "Grain Millers is having a hard time getting the oats they need from Canada to their mills, and we'll be looking to purchase more oats in the U.S.," said Raser.

Grain Millers is working to improve the yield of oats for better economics for farmers. Planted acres of oats have declined by more than 50% the last 50 years. The decrease in demand has come from the feed market; the food market has been steadily increasing each year. Pressured by increased soybean and corn production, the remaining oat production is being pushed to the north and west.

Raser predicts the trend of oat production will be similar to that of malt barley, where production is custom-contracted by variety in the U.S. "You should consider custom contracting some oat acres," Raser encouraged the audience in the Practical Farmers' conference session.

Ogawa is cover crop grains and food coordinator at Practical Farmers of Iowa.

Note: PFI will be working this spring and summer with experienced small-grain producers to collect and share tips on growing small grains in Iowa. Look for more practical production information through an upcoming video and Farminar series at www.practicalfarmers.org and in future pages of Wallaces Farmer.

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