

# PFI releases small-grain series

BY NICK OHDE

**P**LANNING for next year's cropping season? With low corn and soybean prices, could small grains offer similar returns with lower input costs?

For the last two years, Practical Farmers of Iowa has conducted on-farm research; hosted field days, conference sessions and webinars; and compiled other resources to provide information on how to profitably raise small grains in Iowa. This December PFI will debut a video series on YouTube based on the knowledge gained. You can find these videos at [youtube.com/pfivideos](http://youtube.com/pfivideos).

The series will feature information gathered from interviews with Iowa producers — both organic and conventional, large and small, young and old — who grow oats, wheat, barley, rye and triticale. In addition, the videos will feature interviews with university researchers working in small-grain agronomy and crop rotation in Iowa.

Farmers can learn why they might consider adding a small-grain crop to their rotations. They'll also get practical information on how to grow small grains: when and how to plant, varieties to plant, how to fit into a livestock operation, how to manage fertility, how to combat weed and disease pressure, when and how to harvest, how to store, and how to attack the biggest barrier to growing small grains: economics and markets.

## Why grow small grains?

Wendy Johnson, vice president of PFI's board of directors, says if Iowa farmers could profitably grow more small grains, it would be a win-win for everyone. "PFI is interested in small-grains research and asking these questions and gaining this kind of knowledge to help address water quality issues and to help farmers become more profitable," she says. "And not just in the short term. If we can build soil health, we can make sure our farms stay profitable for generations to come."

A big roadblock to small-grain production in Iowa, however, is that the crops haven't been grown on large acreages across the state in more than a generation. "Small-grains production is kind of becoming a lost art," Johnson says. More resources on how to grow small grains successfully is valuable to all farmers who haven't grown the crops before, but is especially helpful for beginning farmers, who face an additional set of hurdles.

As a beginning farmer herself, Johnson is well-aware of these challenges. She and her husband, Johnny Rafkin, run Jóia Food Farm, where they have a small organic crop rotation in addition to pigs, sheep, chickens and a few turkeys. She says, for organic farmers, small grains are essential. She also works on her family's farm, Center View Farms, a conventional corn and soybean operation, and wonders if small grains could be included to help combat weed problems, like herbicide resistant waterhemp.

"From a beginning-farmer perspective,

having some basic knowledge of small-grains production and what to look for would be very helpful," she says. "When to harvest, what to look for in terms of disease, basic marketing questions. Things like that would be very helpful in knowing whether or not they could fit profitably into our rotation." Answers for many of those questions and more will be included in the video series.

In addition to the video series, PFI offers a wealth of information about small-grain production on its website for free. At [practicalfarmers.org/small-grains](http://practicalfarmers.org/small-grains), you'll find a business directory with listings of buyers of small grains and sellers of small-grain seed, information on benefits of small grains, and an overview of PFI's work with companies in the food and beverage supply chain to help grow the market for Iowa-raised small grains. You'll also find information from on-farm research, past blogs and articles, conference sessions, and links to university research.

Ohde writes for PFI in Ames.

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