

Small grains: Overcoming the challenge

BY NICK OHDE

THOUGH corn and soybean harvests are almost here, small-grain harvest across the state is now complete. Farmers were generally pleased with their oat, wheat, barley, triticale and rye crops this year.

David Weisberger, a graduate student at Iowa State University studying small-grain production in Iowa, has been traveling the state and talking to producers the last couple years. In general, he says, 2016 was a better year for growing small grains than last year.

"Many of the farmers I spoke with this year were able to plant spring small grains early and reap the benefits of that opportunity," he says, "some central and south-central counties in Iowa were planting in mid-to-late March."

Early planting helps small grains, which are cool-season crops, spend more of their life cycle in cooler conditions, which improves yields and prevents disease.

"Erratic climate patterns are a perennial issue now, and this growing season was no different," says Weisberger. "In central Iowa, a moist, cool spring turned into an almost month-long near drought during important stages of oat development and reproduction."

That dry spell may have actually been a good thing, however. He says the dry conditions may have helped keep rust issues at bay, and the majority of disease problems this past year seemed mainly related to barley yellow dwarf virus (BYDV).

■ **Opportunity with oats.** Challenges with rain and high humidity made swathing and combining a headache for some growers, and grain storage and dry-down problematic for others.

Weisberger, who works primarily with oats, says he's been getting calls and emails from farmers with 90-plus-bushel-per-acre oat yields and 36-pound-per-bushel test weights. "This bodes well for marketing a food-grade product," he says.

John Gilbert, farming near Iowa Falls, was one of those central Iowa farmers who was able to plant oats in March, and harvested 85- to 90-bushel-per-acre oats in mid-July. "This year was almost ideal for oats. It was a little colder in the early

spring, so they were slower coming up, but the rest of the year was ideal," he says. "In this area, we didn't have excess moisture, so we didn't have a lot of green material growing up underneath the oats, and that led to better harvest conditions."

Last year his oats grew very tall, which led to lodging.

■ **Growing rye for seed.** Jack Boyer farms near Reinbeck in east-central Iowa. He grew cereal rye for cover crop seed for the first time in 2016, and harvested 57 bushels per acre.

Because he was growing for seed, he had the seed germination tested and it came back at 92%. "This is my first year growing rye for seed, so I didn't really know what to expect," he says, "but I'm satisfied with the results."

In addition to the seed, Boyer was able to sell the straw for a net income of \$170 per acre. "Reviewing the value of the rye seed/straw vs. soybeans that would have traditionally been grown in this area of the field, I'd say I made more money with the rye than soybeans would have made this year."

The rye brought an equal price per bushel and produced similar yields to soybeans, but he says it had lower herbicide and fertilizer costs, and that's why it was more profitable.

Boyer also conducted a strip trial in the cereal rye field with Practical Farmers of Iowa, examining the ability of a plant growth regulator (PGR) to prevent lodging.

"There was no difference in the yield," he says, though there was no lodging in any of the strips, treated or nontreated. "The regulator did reduce biomass by about 2,000 pounds per acre," he adds.

■ **Cereal rye for seed.** Jerry Laughlin farms near Imogene in southwest Iowa and also grew cereal rye for cover crop seed this year. "This is the third and by far the best crop I've raised," he says. His rye yielded 53 bushels per acre.

Although heavy rains late in the growing season resulted in some lodging — he says he took about a 5- to 10-bushel-per-acre yield hit — the weather was good for rye most of the year. Laughlin says he sprayed with a fungicide at pollination because of the wet weather, but wasn't sure that was necessary in retrospect.

Mark Schleisman of Lake City in north-



GROWING OATS: Central Iowa farmer Craig Fleishman of Minburn windrowed oats with a 2320 John Deere swather on July 15.

west Iowa grew winter triticale this year and also experienced late-season rains. "It started raining after grain fill was completed, and it did hamper drydown and baling of the straw some," he says. He direct-cut the triticale with a draper head at 15.3% moisture, a little wetter than he would have liked because of the rain.

His crop yielded 89 bushels per acre, and he says that number could have been a bit higher with a bit more rain in June. He grew the triticale for cover crop seed to use on his acres and to sell locally. In addition to the grain, Schleisman harvested 5.6 round bales per acre of straw, roughly 2.8 tons per acre that will be used for cow feed this winter.

■ **Winter triticale beats weeds.** Paul Mugge of Sutherland in northwest Iowa grew organic winter triticale that yielded 73 bushels per acre. "The triticale made it through the winter very well and was nearly weed-free. It was pretty. Best yield I've had for several years," he says.

The sticky postharvest weather has been a hassle, though: "The only problem is that I can't get it dry. Continuous air for three weeks and I've gained very little. Just too much humidity," he says. Mugge grows seed for Albert Lea Seed House based in Minnesota.

■ **Success with succotash.** Farmer Ron Rosmann of Harlan in southwest Iowa grew organic oats and succotash. His succotash, a blend of 40% oats, 25% barley, 15% wheat and 20% field peas, yielded

65 bushels per acre and will be used as livestock feed. He grew about 100 acres of oats, some Reeves and some Hayden. They yielded about 80 bushels per acre on, with 35- to 35.5-pound test weight.

"I thought we would have poorer quality and lower test weights. We were pleasantly surprised," he says, "Getting it planted early really helped." Rosmann started planting on March 21 and had finished by March 30. He'll sell some of the oats to Grain Millers and feed the rest to cattle, hogs and chickens.

A successful crop year like this one seems to help build morale among farmers hoping to diversify their operations. "All of the farmers I speak to want to make a third crop work and are aware that we have a long way to go with management and markets before small grains can be successful year in and year out," says Weisberger.

Weisberger has worked with groups like Practical Farmers of Iowa, Grain Millers and Albert Lea Seed House to make those connections and sees that as the way to get momentum going for sustained success: "Continued collaboration involving farmers, researchers and millers will be essential if we're going to make this work."

A resource to learn more about the specifics of oat production is "The Growth and Development of Oats — A Production Guide," compiled by Grain Millers Inc. It's free from Practical Farmers of Iowa. Go online to practicalfarmers.org/small-grains.

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