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Bringing back a 'third crop'

By TOMOKA OGAWA

FARMER Craig Fleishman of Minburn planted oats along with red clover this spring. He's been reintroducing oats on his farm for the last several years as a third crop. While adding diversity in crops may seem like a "new" trend, Iowa has a long history of growing small grains.

According to the "Iowa Yearbook of Agriculture," in 1912 Iowa produced 5.7 million bushels of spring wheat, 11.4 million of winter wheat, 11.1 million of barley, and 1.3 million of rye. Oats was the second-biggest crop that year following corn, with nearly 5 million planted acres and 208 million bushels in production.

Wheat was included on 36% of Iowa farms in 1920. The percentage steadily declined, and only 1% of Iowa farms were growing wheat by 1978. By 1997 the number fell to below 1%, according to a study by the Leopold Center at Iowa State University. Eight percent of Iowa farms still grew oats in 2002, but like wheat, oats also experienced a drastic decline compared to 81% of Iowa farms growing them in 1920.

On April 4, Fleishman planted oats and red clover by drilling 2 bushels of oats and 12 pounds of red clover per acre. Last year he drilled oats using a grass seeder, but it didn't do a good job spreading the seeds. So this year, he used a regular drill. He has about 8 acres of oats in a strip-cropping arrangement and 12 acres total. He expects to harvest his oats at the end of July using a 15-foot soybean grain head. Straw will be dropped into a windrow so it can be baled.

Diversify crop rotation

Growing up, Fleishman remembers seeing oats in the neighborhood before it slowly disappeared. He wants to diversify his cropping program, and oats seem to fit this purpose well. "Oats are an excellent cover crop option, and it seems like a logical choice to add oats in rotation," he says.

His oats did fine with this year's wet spring, as well as with the snow in April and May. "Weed control in oats has been real easy," he adds. "The oats and clover crowded out the weeds, and it did not require any herbicide."

Fleishman thinks marketing oats may be more challenging than controlling weeds. But he also sees potential in selling or using them for cover crop seeding.

Tim Sieren, who farms in Keota and is part of Practical Farmers' on-farm research project, planted more than 60 acres of cereal rye last October for forage, cover crop and seed production. Sieren started planting rye several years ago as a forage source for his cattle, so he didn't have to designate any land to hay production. He recognizes the many benefits rye brings. Especially after seeing the erosion control after spring's big rains, he plans to seed more acres of rye cover crop in soybean ground that's going to corn next year.

This is Sieren's third year of combining rye for seed, as 15 acres were harvested for seed and straw in mid-July, followed by a clover cover crop that was interseeded in early April as part of the Practical



GROWING OATS: Farming near Minburn in central Iowa, Craig Fleishman is planting some oats along with red clover. He's been reintroducing oats on his farm for the last several years, learning how a small-grain crop can diversify a corn-bean rotation.

Farmers' nitrogen research project. He tried cleaning the seed with the combine in past years, but had problems with it feeding through a grain drill.

Sieren hired a local seed cleaner in past years to clean the rye seed before planting, but he's looking into faster and more economical ways to do it himself. He plans to use most of the seed for his fall cover crop seeding and has talked to seed dealers about selling extra seed locally because of increased interest in cover cropping.

Sieren has found planting rye in the fall after corn harvest, harvesting the rye crop as high moisture forage in mid- to late May, and following with no-till soybeans will not cause a yield penalty in the beans. Rye can also be used for fall or spring grazing, and he is harvesting seed and straw from it.

Sieren decided to try raising his own seed to save on seed costs after it took a big price jump two years ago. "Putting a small grain in the rotation is also a good way to spread out the workload since planting and harvesting occur during slower times of the year," he says. "It's also a good way to utilize spring moisture and scavenge residual nitrogen."

No doubt corn and soybeans will remain No. 1 and No. 2 in Iowa agriculture, but third crops are making resurgence on Iowa farms — grown as cover crops, for forage and for seed. Bringing greater diversity to the crop rotation has benefits for soil health, breaks up pest cycles, and may open the door for added on-farm enterprises and the next generation of farmers.

Ogawa is with Practical Farmers of Iowa.