
Wheat - The Opportunity Crop

Wheat is the summer crop. We have been blessed with excellent wheat yields the last four years. This and a good price has created new excitement for growing a crop which has sometimes been shorted its full management attention in Southeast Nebraska. While this wheat crop will not have the same yield level as recent years, the combination of price and yield should still be quite good. This column will look at several key notes in our wheat crop this year and opportunities for the future.

Wheat has some advantages which should be noted. The crop is harvested in the summer and most is sold. The income is very handy to reduce operating cost loans for the fall crops of corn, soybeans, and milo. Wheat produces nearly the same bushels when no-tilled behind soybeans, milo, or corn as it does on second year wheat or retiring alfalfa acres. Wheat stubble fields kept clean and no-tilled to corn give a significant yield advantage of 25-28 bushels per acre when compared to other planting options. In recent cropping surveys I just completed in Gage, Jefferson, Johnson, and Pawnee Counties, I noted lots of lost opportunities to take advantage of this key dryland production advantage. Too much wheat on wheat, and too many wheat stubble acres being tilled, even to the point of almost no residue cover available. Wheat offers farmers a third crop to fit into corn-soybean or milo-soybean rotations. A crop with good fine residue cover to protect our valuable soils. Wheat does well when the fall crops are a bit short of water.

When planting wheat there is a risk of wheat streak mosaic virus doing considerable damage to the crop if green volunteer wheat is present in the field or in fields adjacent to the newly planted wheat. Stunting caused by wheat streak mosaic will reduce yields from 25 to 60 percent. When spraying volunteer with glyphosate and or atrazine the treatment needs to be done three weeks ahead of wheat planting time to make sure there is a 10 day to two week brown period. This kills off the wheat curl mite which carries the wheat streak virus to the wheat crop. This has been a disease on the increase in recent years.

In the past three years a number of wheat fields in Gage County have had discounted value because of common bunt or stinking smut. All wheat seed from all sources should be treated this fall with fungicides labeled to prevent smut. If this is done it will prevent producers from a number of seedling disease problems as well as prevent the smut. Check out the picture on the plant and disease alerts section of our website (URL below) . I think that will confirm you don't want this disease.

Wheat needs to be planted in late September or during the month of October into firm seedbeds like those of no-till fields. If the seedbed is worked for some reason, make sure it is firmed back up by rain and or harrowing operations. Plant at one and one-half inches deep. Shallow planted wheat is much more likely to be affected by winter injury and root and crown rot infections. Starter fertilizer for a quick fall start along with recommended levels of phosphorus and nitrogen fertilizer will help achieve top production. Wheat is often shorted fertilizer.

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