Flying Turnips or Rye into Corn

Crop residues like corn stalks provide good winter feed. Adding turnips or cereal rye to them can sometimes make them even better. Corn stalks are one of the better and least expensive winter feeds we have. But once cattle finish eating the grain and husks, what remains isn't all that good.

Some growers have improved both the amount and quality of corn stalk grazing by flying turnip or rye seed onto standing corn in early August. When successful, turnip or rye plants provide more grazing days and extra protein when corn stalks become poor quality.

Let me emphasize the words 'when successful'. It's not all that easy to get a good stand of either turnips or rye to become productive in a growing corn field. Several factors limit success rates. Moisture easily can be limiting in dryland corn, but also can be difficult to manage in surface irrigated fields. Even under pivots, providing water for rye or turnips without slowing corn harvest takes planning.

Another problem is the density of the corn canopy. Irrigated fields can be especially thick, acting like weeds to prevent adequate light from reaching new seedlings. Chopping corn for silage or combining high moisture grain early helps.

And speaking of weeds, herbicide carryover also causes problems. Turnips are very sensitive, but rye also is affected. Lastly is wheel traffic at harvest. Turnips are damaged more than rye, but both lose stand if fields get muddy.

I do like improving corn stalks with rye or turnips. But be aware there are challenges, and try to find ways to overcome them.