

Perennial grain offers westside farmers options

By MARGARETT WATERBURY
For the Capital Press

MOUNT VERNON, Wash. — Colin Curwen-McAdams is a Ph.D. candidate working under Stephen Jones at Washington State University.

He's spent the last several years working on breeding projects that attempt to create a perennial grain crop by making crosses between wheat and wheatgrass.

Just don't call it perennial wheat.

"We're not calling it perennial wheat," Curwen-McAdams laughs. "When I say that, people think they know what I'm talking about. Perennial wheat, this magical crop of wheat that grows back, like a fairy tale. Perennial wheat is a wonderful idea. But there's no alignment between that and what I'm actually working with."

The new crop is called Tritipyrum, a fusion of the scientific names of its parents, Triticum (wheat) and Thinopyrum (wheatgrass). Its goal is to meet the needs of Western Washington and Oregon farmers in need of a grain for their rotational program.

"Here in the Skagit Valley, there are a lot of high-value crops in rotation, and nobody is primarily a grain farmer," Curwen-McAdams says. "People here don't really want to grow wheat. What they want is a grain in their rotation to add organic matter, break up soil tilth after heavy cultivation, and reduce the amount of tillage in years they're not growing heavy-till crops. And, we want it to have utility as a grain crop as well as a feed and forage crop for livestock."

The new crosses have been made primarily at Washington State University's Mount Vernon Research and Extension Center, and selection rounds have prior-



Courtesy of Washington State University
Graduate research assistant Colin Curwen-McAdams displays the new wheat-wheatgrass hybrid species, Tritipyrum aaseae.

itized regional adaptation. The team is currently working with numerous lines from

On the Cover

New Tritipyrum crosses grow in a field last summer.

Photo courtesy of Colin Curwen-McAdams

stable crosses of bread wheat and Thinopyrum, but developing a truly robust perennial remains elusive.

"It's still a challenge to get something a farmer can really count on in the field, especially in cold winters like this one," Curwen-McAdams says.

Researchers have been

trying for about 100 years to breed perennial grain crops by hybridizing wheat with perennial relatives.

"The fact that we're not surrounded by them tells you how difficult that is," Curwen-McAdams says.

Yet the dream of a hardy,


multipurpose perennial grain crop remains tantalizing for researchers and west-of-the-Cascades growers.

Support from buyers such as brewers, maltsters and bakers has also buoyed the project.

"There are a lot of peo-

ple interested in the flavor and the story. They want the food they're producing to be reflective of agricultural and environmental stewardship," he says.

For example, one line of Tritipyrum has a blue-green seed color.



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