

Growers can underestimate value of cover crops

When you talk to Don Wirth of Saddle Butte Seeds near Shedd, Ore., it doesn't take

long to hear the frustration he has with the 90 percent of the growers who underestimate

the value of cover crops.

Talking to the countless number of folks he meets

during the 30-plus trade shows and field days he attends a year, Wirth spends most of his time trying to get the message across how cover crops can end up being more profitable than the "cash" crop itself.

Just returned from a conference in the Midwest, he spoke of his frustration.

"My mission is to educate," Wirth said. "Whether your cover crop is annual ryegrass, crimson clover, kale, peas, radish, vetch or any of the cover crop mixes, your cash crop yields are going to go up."

Cover crops are about soil health, he said.

"When Dr. Lloyd Murdoch, extension soils specialist from the University of Kentucky spoke at the Oregon Ryegrass Growers meeting in Albany recently, we were both frustrated to see first-hand what farmers don't know," he said.

Wirth, who has been in the seed business in the Midwest and in Oregon for more than 30 years, got his start on the farm his family still runs. His family's involvement in his family-owned and -operated Saddle Butte Seed Co., frees up Wirth to take his message

on the road across the nation.

He works with customers from Nevada to Virginia. His sales associates are all farmers in Illinois, Minnesota and Oregon. They assist customers anywhere in the world, including the U.S., Canada and Europe.

"That's one of the things that gives Saddle Butte a difference," Wirth said.

Ron Althoff has a degree in agronomy and joined Saddle Butte in 2002 to pursue his passion of improving the quality of soil and water while reducing erosion.

Brian Wieland, who graduated from Illinois State University with a bachelor's degree in agriculture production, was introduced to cover crops in his quest for better roots and healthier soils.

T.J. Kartes, from Blooming Prairie, Minn., got hooked on cover crops when he saw the difference they made on his family farm, Wirth said.

"We don't just educate growers about the need for cover crops but help them get started," he said. "Our staff has the knowledge and training to do that."

Wirth recommends at least a no-till and cover crop system like one that has resulted in real changes for Ralph "Ju-



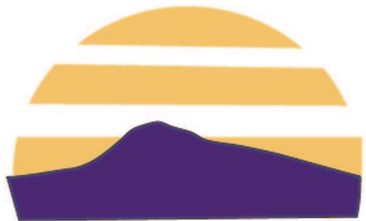
Jan Jackson/For the Capital Press
Don Wirth of Saddle Butte Seeds near Shedd, Ore., spends most of his time trying to get the message across that cover crops can improve yields and soil health.

nior" Upton in Springerton, Ill.

"The effect of Upton's improved soil has been dramatic," Wirth said. "Before the change, corn yields were as low as 105 to 110 bushels per acre and after he started his no-till cover crop program, his yields have risen to well more than 180-200 bushels an acre."

Upton also estimates that no-till farming saves him \$10 to \$15 per acre, primarily thanks to smaller equipment, fewer trips across the field and less fuel burned in the process, Wirth said.

— Jan Jackson



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