



A rare breed but not albinos, Siberian elk have blue eyes and pink inside their ears.

## Rare White Elk Attract Attention To Farm

Leonard and Diane Witscheber sell elk for meat, but they won't part with any of their rare white elk. The unusual animals do get people's attention, however, and that's good for sales.

"They look like albinos but they're actually a breed known as Siberian elk, with blue eyes and pink inside their ears," explains Diane.

She and her husband currently have around 40 elk; 7 are white Siberians. Initially they added white stock to the farm by artificially inseminating several cows with Siberian elk semen. Then they also bought several purebred Siberians.

"The Siberians have softer hair than the crossbred white elk," notes Witscheber. "All the white elk are a little smaller than the rest of the elk."

Witscheber says the white elk sell at a premium, but it can be hard to find ones for sale. They plan to build their white elk herd numbers before selling any themselves.

The Witschebers bought their first elk simply because they enjoyed watching them. As they added more, they started looking at them for income as well. Today they sell meat from excess animals through a local farmers market and to others in the local community.

While they keep their best bulls for breeding, high quality bulls are sold as trophy animals through a local hunting preserve. Prices for breeding stock varies significantly depending on the animal, says Witscheber.

## Tillage Radishes Break Up Compaction

"Anyone who farms can benefit by planting tillage radishes during the fall as a cover crop. The roots break up soil compaction and leave the soil in a much nicer planting condition the following spring," says Steve Groff, Holtwood, Penn.

Groff has been selling "tillage radish" seed for five years and says he can hardly keep up with the demand. "The first year I sold enough seed for only a few hundred acres, but last year I sold enough seed for over 75,000 acres. Most of it was planted in the mid-west and eastern states, but some was planted throughout the south."

The reason tillage radishes are so good at breaking up soil compaction is their long tap root, which can reach down up to 36 in. They can often eliminate the need for deep rippers and chisel plows. "It's a biological solution that reduces compaction, saves fuel, and helps the soil," he says.

Tillage radishes also offer other benefits, says Groff. "They provide outstanding weed control. They take up left-over nitrogen in the fall and then the following spring the decomposed plants release it back into the soil, reducing nitrogen costs. And they increase water infiltration."

On his own farm, Groff has planted field corn, sweet corn, soybeans and wheat into tillage radishes. But corn seems to respond the best.

He says research indicates up to a 40-bu. per acre corn yield increase where tillage radishes were planted the fall before. "The yield increase may vary, but I've never seen a yield decrease," says Groff.

The University of Maryland has conducted cover crop test plots on his farm. "We've identified the best radishes, with the strongest tap roots to break up subsoil compaction."

The biggest limitation to tillage radishes is they have a short planting window. "They should be planted any time during August



Tillage radishes are good at breaking up soil compaction because of their long tap root, which can reach down as deep as 36 in.

Crops such as field corn, sweet corn, soybeans and wheat can be planted into tillage radishes, says Steve Groff.

or September so the roots will have time to grow deep into the soil before the plants are killed by a hard freeze. For corn and soybeans it's tough to get radishes planted in time for them to grow." However some farmers are making hi clearance seeders to go through standing corn 4 weeks before harvest in order to get the cover crop planted in a timely fashion.

Radishes can be mixed with rye or oats. The rye will lie dormant over the winter and come back to life the following spring.

Radish seeds look like alfalfa seeds. "You want to get them 1/4 or 1/2 in. deep in the ground like you would with alfalfa. Or you can broadcast the seeds on top of the crop," says Groff. "Any no-till drill can be used to plant them."

At a planting rate of 8 lbs. per acre and around \$3.00 per lb., it costs less than \$25 per acre to plant tillage radish seed, notes Groff.

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### Reader Inquiry No.81

Trophy animal prices vary according antler shape and size.

"We have sold animals from \$700 to as high as \$6,000," she says.

Another ongoing cost is certification. In order to sell live animals off the farm, they have to be tested for Chronic Wasting Disorder, TB and, if sold out of state, Brucellosis. Witscheber says their farm is completely certified in those respects.

Although the couple is seeing a positive response to their meat sales effort, Witscheber doesn't recommend elk production for

the profit. "If you want to make money, I wouldn't recommend elk," she says. "The market still isn't there for the meat. And there is no market for the antlers either. Fencing is expensive, and you have to respect the fact that elk are wild animals."

"Although they cost us money, we still love looking at them, and we love the way elk tastes. Plus, it's good for you."

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