

Business Is Booming For Cover Crop Experts

Adam Dahmer grew up on an Illinois farm that went 100 percent no-till in 1983 and started using cover crops in the late 90's. Adam, his father Terry, and brother John have seen the benefits of that system every year on the family's 1,300-acre farm. "Improved soil health, less erosion, more microbial activity, better use of nutrients, less compaction, higher yields, and more efficient water use. Those are the major benefits we've seen on our farm," says Adam.

In the winter of 2012-2013, after realizing that their crops withstood the previous year's drought much better than conventionally-cropped land, Terry Dahmer decided to design a cover crop seeding system to fit his Miller Nitro 5240 high-clearance sprayer. Adam took that as a sign of opportunity and launched a business called Advance Cover Crops to supply seed to other farmers who showed an interest in the concept. He launched a website that shows several photos of cover crop activity on their farm. The site also includes information on several types of seed and references to research and articles on cover cropping.

"I don't claim to be an expert," says Adam, who has a degree in construction management and a minor in ag economics, "because for every one thing we learn there are several more questions that present themselves. I'm able to build from our 15-year family history of cover cropping

and combine that with things learned from training sessions, my cover crop agronomist, and other farmers who share their experiences on different cover crops. In this new frontier of agriculture there are far more questions than answers, and my goal is to supply customers with high quality seed, answer any questions that producers may have, and do my best to make their venture into cover crops as easy and as successful as possible."

Dahmer says his market is customers in southern Illinois, the bootheel of Missouri, and western Kentucky. "Most people order product by phone and pick it up in person because they want to see who they're buying from," says Adam.

In the fall of 2013 they seeded 45 to 50 lbs. of cereal rye and 8 to 9 lbs. of hairy vetch into corn about a month before harvest. Soybeans received 10 to 11 lbs. of annual rye and 6 to 7 lbs. of crimson clover just as they were starting to yellow before maturity. At soybean harvest the ground was just turning green and at corn harvest the cereal rye was 2 to 5 in. tall.

"Cereal rye is an excellent cover crop in corn ahead of soybeans because it's a nitrogen scavenger that pulls that elusive nutrient into its roots and binds it up for next year's crop," says Adam. In the spring of 2014 the Dahmer's terminated the cover crops with glyphosate. They planted corn a week after spraying and planted soybeans just 2 to 3 days after spraying. The new plants grew in seed furrows opened up in the mat of of dying



Cover crop seeding system is designed to fit the Dahmers' Miller Nitro 5240 high clearance sprayer. Photo at left shows cereal rye being seeded into standing corn.

grass, absorbing moisture and nutrients and thriving in the soil protected from erosion. Adam admits the first few times they used this method they were nervous about seed stands and early season growth. "Seeds germinate and grow a little slower than conventional tillage because the soil is cooler, but a few weeks later things even out and the plants really take off."

Adam says a person starting with cover

crops shouldn't expect a yield bump in the first year of cover cropping, but improved yields are likely to show up down the road. "The immediate big benefits are in erosion control, nutrient uptake and weed control," he says.

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Website Helps Rent Farms Out For Weddings, Events

If you've ever thought about renting out your farm for weddings or if you're interested in finding a place to get married, you should check out the website, www.rusticbride.com. It includes 3,000 sites throughout the U.S. and offers a free listing service to rural business owners who would like to be added.

Therese Sison started the website with information she compiled while planning her own wedding in 2010. "Rustic means many different things to different people. That can be a barn on a farm. For others it's a nice resort lodge in a rustic setting," she explains.

Businesses fill out a form about their services, and she makes sure they fit her broad definition of rustic before posting them.

Besides farms, listings include camps, orchards, vineyards, wineries and retreat centers. Without any marketing, her site has grown organically by referrals and people finding the site with search engines.

One good example is Susan Bell of Engel Farms (www.engel-farms.com) west of Kalamazoo, Mich. She and Bill Engel bought their 80-acre fruit farm to raise crops, sheep and peaches. They "accidentally" got into the wedding and event business in 2008 after saying yes to a neighbor who wanted to hold a wedding in their roomy farm yard.

Business spread by word of mouth and the farm, with its pre-Civil War hay barn and 1800's house, has been the venue for weddings with up to 500 guests. Initially, most were local, Bell says. But she has noticed more calls from other parts of the



Website offers a free listing service to rural business owners wanting to rent their farm out for weddings and events.

state, the Chicago area, and even other parts of the country. She believes the inquiries are due to websites such as Rustic Bride that list her as a venue.

For people looking for a venue, Sison suggests asking a lot of questions about details of services offered. For example: Do they provide tables and chairs, take care of the liquor license, have adequate parking?

Rusticbride.com organizes the venues by state, and each business's name links to its web page - for free. For venues interested in more exposure, Sison plans to offer advertising in the future, but will continue free listings as well.

While maintaining the website is a hobby in addition to Sison's full-time job in education, she enjoys the response she gets from it. In the past year her website racked up 1.5 million referrals to venue sites.

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Cornerstone Farm Ventures sells poultry growing, processing and packing equipment to customers throughout the U.S.

Everything Poultry At Cornerstone Farm

Jim McLaughlin is often called "The Chicken Guy" because of his nearly 30 years of experience raising and processing poultry. At a young age Jim and his wife Peg started raising poultry for their family and expanded to selling product in stores and farmer's markets. Their need for poultry handling and processing equipment led to the development of Cornerstone Farm Ventures, which sells poultry growing, processing and packing equipment to customers throughout the country.

They started their business in 2000 and soon became dealers for several different equipment manufacturers. Shortly thereafter they launched a website that's a vast source of information and equipment for small flock poultry producers. Jim writes a blog on poultry management, conducts workshops on

pasture-raised poultry and shares his vast knowledge with interested producers near and far.

The McLaughlins also custom-graze cattle using rotational grazing practices on seasonal pastures.

"Our mission is to provide know-how for raising poultry and carry equipment ranging from the perfect chicken plucker to vacuum packers and everything in between," says Jim. "We strive to exceed customer expectations for value, products and service and to always treat others the way we want to be treated."

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