

Producer Profile

Craig Shaw - Lacombe, Alberta

"In the Calgary-Edmonton corridor you need to follow the rules to be successful growing winter wheat," says Craig Shaw, of Lacombe. "Growers in other areas may be able to bend the rules, but in this region, we need to do everything by the book," he says. "There are lots of benefits to winter wheat, they're not all big but I think they're worthwhile. You need to do a good job of management to see the benefits. If you push the envelope those benefits can be gone."

The biggest benefit of winter wheat, according to Shaw, is August harvest. "Around here, we're used to rain just about every week," he says. "But come combining time, we can't turn the tap off. And once we move into September, we have to expect frost, rain, whatever. In August we have much drier conditions and longer days, harvest is much easier on equipment and easier on people. But, you have to seed on time in fall to get a nice even mature crop in August. If we don't get an early harvest from winter wheat, it's coming off the same time as spring crops and you've lost that particular advantage."

Shaw likes to have as much of his crop as possible in the bin before 'the quality line' in mid-September. It's a big job, but he feels any grain he can harvest by then has a fair chance of grading a 2 or better. "After September 15th, we have to be ready for some kind of bad weather," he says. "Our whole livelihood is out there and every day there's more risk it will be downgraded by a snowstorm or something. It's a comfort to have some crop off and safe in the bin. Our alternative to winter wheat is probably CPS wheat," Shaw adds. "If CPS gets a snow in September, it goes flat and you have to fight with a tangled mess. That might not happen very often, but when it does, winter wheat in the bin is much better."

Winter wheat lowers the stress in spring, too. "When it's the middle of May and you haven't turned a wheel because everything's too wet, it's a good feeling to have four or five hundred acres seeded in the fall." Shaw doesn't put a lot of stock in the financial benefits of winter wheat yet. "Rather than compare one crop to another, I look at the whole farm and see where each crop fits into the system," he says. "What I do with one crop over here may have its biggest benefit over there in some other crop. I wouldn't advise anyone to compromise any spring crops to grow winter wheat. Find a system where the crops complement one another." Shaw likes to spread his risk over one more crop and widen his seeding and harvest windows.

"The net return isn't the big thing. Last year, our winter wheat only out-yielded spring crops by 10 or 15 bushels. But for us, winter wheat is a more consistent crop across the field than CPS wheat. More important for me, is that when you have some crop seeded before you start seeding in spring, you can do a better job of spring crops. Getting them seeded in better time often means better quality at the end of the day. We have a very narrow window to



Benefits of Growing Winter Cereals:

Equipment & Labour Efficiencies
By using seed drills, combines and labour outside of their traditional busy times, there is an opportunity for lower demands on equipment and operators.

Direct Seeding
Leaving your stubble helps save your soil from wind and water erosion.

Moisture Utilization
What better way to take advantage of snow-melt moisture than to have your crop already in the ground. Winter cereals begin growing very early in the spring and can use the early spring snow-melt moisture.

Earlier Cash Flows
Winter cereals are harvested earlier than other spring cereals and can therefore be marketed earlier, creating some much needed cash flow on the farm at harvest time.

get our spring crops in so we don't end up with a lot of late crops."

With good harvest weather always in short supply, seeding as soon as a fields combined can seem like too much to do, but Shaw doesn't agree. "Once you've seen the benefits of winter wheat, the difficulties don't look so bad," he says. "You'll find ways, being prepared is key. The problems are much less than people think." On his own farm, Shaw often rents a tender truck from a fertilizer dealer. They're not usually busy this time of year. He likes to seed into canola stubble. Peas don't leave enough residue and the little residue there is can be a problem. It doesn't take much moisture for any vines left in the field to get tough and ball up on the drill. This year, for the first time, Shaw split his nitrogen application. If it had been a dry spring, he'd have left the crop with the 50 lbs N he put on in fall. "We considered the soil moisture and N levels in spring, and decided to put on some more. This year, we used all granular, but I've got some new nozzles so I can fertilize with the sprayer in future."

Seeding on time is vital, says Shaw. "In spring, a crop can compensate for some seeding delay," he says. "In fall, the sooner you can seed the better. And seed shallow so the crop can get up and out of the ground fast. In spring the days are lengthening, the soil is getting warmer every day. In fall, the shorter days make a big difference to crops. I've watched winter wheat start actively growing and it does really well, then it slows down and you wonder what's gone wrong. Nothing's wrong. It's just that the plants aren't getting enough light and warmth to make the growth that they could have earlier. Every day later in seeding temperatures are dropping and days are shorter. Seeding conditions can be tougher for us in August than in spring. We're quite blessed here. We can seed with almost any tool and get a good catch in spring because we're spoiled for moisture. Winter wheat really shines on fields that are hard to get on in spring," Shaw continues. "We often finish up just mudding in some seed when the land is wet so it ends up crusty and lumpy and we get half a crop. For this area we need to seed winter wheat between August 15th and September 15th. Stubble is important to hold the snow into spring. The snow insulates the crop, but with reasonable stubble it doesn't pack - packed snow can lead to snow mold."

"Plants are most susceptible to winterkill or snow-mold in spring, when they've used up their energy reserves," says Shaw. "We sometimes see problems in patches where the soil bares off in late winter and then it's cold again. Wheat streak mosaic can be an issue, too. You

have to be sure there's no green leaf material in the field to act as a host for the wheat curl mite that carries the virus." Shaw finds his preharvest Roundup helps with this as it browns off any grassy weeds.

On his high organic matter soils in the black soil zone, Shaw deals with high weed pressures. Seeding in fall gives him a little edge over the increasing numbers of spring-germinating weeds with life cycles that match those of spring-seeded crops. "A lot of weeds germinate in spring," he says. "But they can't compete with the winter wheat because it's already established in spring. We're getting good control and we're removing some seeds from the weed bank. We see less wild oat pressure in spring crops after winter wheat. Winter wheat isn't a sure-fire wild oat control, any place the crop is less competitive, wild oats can get ahead. We've had a bit of a problem where the sun can get through the crop, say, beside a road." Shaw adds that "A lot of herbicides don't work very well in fall; they need warmer temperatures for good control. We have gone with just MCPA, but now we're seeing winter cleavers. Frontline controls that and works well in cool temperatures."



Craig's Seeding Tips

Seed on time: mid-August to mid-September in his area.

Seed shallow: half-inch is ideal, no more than an inch deep.

Seed into standing stubble: at least 4 to 6 inches high.

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