

Producer Profile

Larry Kitz - Two Hills, AB

For Larry Kitz of Two Hills, the greatest challenge on the farm is improving the quality of his thin black and grey wooded (luvisolic) soils, which have naturally low organic matter and poor fertility. Winter wheat is one way he's building organic matter and improving his soil. "Soil conservation is one of the major benefits of winter wheat," says Kitz. "In this area, water erosion from spring runoff can be quite a problem. Winter wheat is already established before freeze-up so that in spring it has plenty of roots to hold the soil." The crop protects against wind erosion as well. "Winter wheat fits well into our direct seeding, continuous cropping program and that's making a huge difference to our soil quality. We've seen the benefits in our soil tests. The soil quality measures are getting better every year. And, of course, our crops are better."

Winter wheat is a new crop in Kitz' country, northeast of Vegreville. Older varieties, designed for the traditional winter wheat growing region of southern Alberta, couldn't survive the cold winters. "New varieties are important for us to grow winter wheat," says Kitz. "The agronomic package is even more important, though. We leave a tall stubble, 8 or 10 inches high, and direct seed winter wheat into it as soon as we have the preceding crop off."

Kitz grows about 300 acres of winter wheat each year. He'd like to grow more, but around half his production is for seed and there isn't a lot of demand in his area yet. He believes acres will increase as more farmers see the benefits of adding another crop to their toolbox. "Farming is a tough game," he says. "We need to use all the tools that are available and put them to work for us if we're going to succeed. I see winter wheat as a useful tool."

"Last year (fall 2002), it was so dry I was afraid to seed my winter wheat. The soil had no tith at all, it just ran through your hands like flour. On September 16th, the day after the last day to have it seeded for crop insurance, I went ahead and seeded anyway. Five days later it was out of the ground. It germinated without any moisture. Spring wheat would just have sat there until we got a rain." Usually, Kitz would seed into canola stubble, but in 2002 pea crops produced only 4 bushels per acre and there was lots of regrowth late in the summer. Kitz figured that was enough crop residue to hold some snow cover over the winter. This year he'll probably seed winter wheat on winter wheat stubble. He plans on enough time between crops for his preseed burnoff to completely kill any green material that can sustain the wheat curl mite, which carries the wheat streak mosaic virus. "It's a pretty clean field," he says. "So far, we don't have any weeds that will be problem in back-to-back winter wheat." (Downy brome can be a problem in traditional winter wheat areas.) Kitz likes to stay flexible in his crop sequences. As a seed grower he has more than the usual rotational considerations. He grows broadleaf crops as break crops between cereals for seed. Sometimes a particular variety is in demand and the best place to put it is on stubble of the same variety.



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.

CDC Raptor is Larry's pick of the available varieties. "It has a good disease resistance package," he says. "It is a feed wheat, but it's a good fit for this area and that's the most important thing to consider when you're choosing a variety."

Kitz broadcasts N and S, the mobile nutrients, in spring, when he knows the crop has come through the winter and there's usually some moisture to take the fertilizer into the soil. "I've put on 100 lbs of N per acre and we haven't seen any lodging, even where we've spread compost. We compost manure from our cattle operation and spread it on fields close to home every four or five years. The boost in fertility generally raises protein levels a point or two, but we haven't had any crops go down." Kitz plans for a fungicide such as Tilt as part of his wheat management. Winter wheat is generally at lower risk from disease than is spring wheat, but Kitz produces seed and uses high nutrient levels - often 100 lbs N - he figures the crop may need the protection. He also applies potash to all his land. The chloride component of the fertilizer may help crops resist disease. Applying potash is part of Kitz' efforts to improve quality and fertility of his soil with its low natural nutrient levels. "Our soils are getting better after 12 years of retaining all our stubble," he says. "Winter wheat fits well in the system. It's just another tool we can use. I like the soil conservation and the biodiversity benefits - it gives ducks and other nesting waterfowl a chance to nest undisturbed. We see quite a few nests in the hayfields where we delay harvest."

The early harvest is a big factor in Kitz' decision to include winter wheat in his cropping sequences. Harvest usually continues well into the fall in his area, so having some crop in the bin in August is always good. Seeding in harvest season is always a challenge. "It takes extra labor to seed during harvest," says Kitz. "But, I do like being able to start harvest early. The inconvenience of seeding is balanced by the benefit of harvesting in August." Kitz finds marketing winter wheat for feed a challenge. Feed markets are somewhat limited in the area. Because the feed mills aren't familiar with winter wheat, they tend to be wary of including the grain in rations and they don't always want to commit themselves to taking a large amount of the grain at one time. Kitz can usually sell only a single B-train load at a time. "It's not the best," he says. "But, at least I don't have to wait for a delivery opportunity and I don't have to wait in line for hours at the elevator."

Seeding Tips from Larry

Be sure to seed into adequate residue. We cut high to

leave at least 8 or 10 inches of stubble. Pick fields that are sheltered from the prevailing winds, if possible with some trees or a shelterbelt, so they'll hold some snow. Seed with the direction of the stubble so you can keep as much standing as possible. Little things make a difference to overwinter survival. Seed shallow, half an inch deep is ideal. I like to see a kernel or two on top of the soil, then I know I've got the depth about right.



Larry Kitz likes his Flexicoil 5000, but he's considering a new opener package with paired rows.

CDC Raptor has a good disease resistance package for Kitz' area and it yields well - in 2003, it produced 62 bushels/acre compared to 52 bushels/acre for Prodigy in the next field.

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Alberta Winter Wheat Producers Commission



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