

One
Farmer's
Almanac

One in a series of regular visits to Laurel Ridge Farms south of Cedar Falls to follow the efforts of one area farmer, John Miller.

Gentlemen, start your crops

Farmer hopes weeds, bad weather don't overtake corn in race toward finish line

By BILL SLAKEY
Courier Staff Writer

CEDAR FALLS — If a field of growing corn looks like the picture of peace and stillness to you, think again.

Think of Indianapolis and Daytona.

"When the seed goes in the ground, the race is on," said John Miller, who you might call the crew chief at Laurel Ridge Farms, south of Cedar Falls. "I know who we're rooting for, and we'll do everything imaginable to make that corn a winner."

"The race is on, and the race is between that seed and the weeds and the weather — because it's got to get to the end of the course before it freezes," he said.

The first month after planting is a critical time for Miller, with crops and weeds fighting for that crucial head start on the growing season.

Timing can make all the difference in scouting for pests and weeds and deciding how to combat them, Miller said.

As always on the farm, a change in the weather can alter almost everything — and everything has a trade-off.

For example, dry weather this spring meant planting could be finished quickly, but in some places it also reduced the effectiveness of the herbicides Miller sprayed before planting.

A high-tech "toe test" — scraping dirt aside with a boot and looking for the white strands of weed roots — told Miller and crop consultant Kay Connelly that grass could be a localized problem.

This year, the solution was a rotary hoe — an array of curved metal spokes that flick weed shoots into the air but leave the more deeply rooted corn behind.

"This was the first time in five or six years that rotary hoeing was the management tool of choice," Miller said, noting that once you see the weeds, it's probably too late to hoe. "My dad used to always say that's the smartest machine on the farm. It takes out the weeds and leaves the corn."

Broadleaf weeds required a second trip through the field, this time with a "contact" herbicide that kills weeds it touches but does not stay active in the soil.

Once again, timing is essential, Miller said. The weeds must have emerged but still be small. If the corn grows too large it will shield them under its leaves. The weather also plays a role.

"You can plant in a wind, you can harvest in a wind, you can cultivate in a wind, you can chisel plow in a wind, but (for) spraying you don't want a wind," he said.

So long hours on the farm don't end with planting; if the weather and conditions are



At this time of year, root development is as important as what goes on above ground for the corn plant, so John Miller, right, and crop consultant Kay Connelly dig up a few plants as part of scouting.

right, you spray, cultivate or scout for problems.

As Indianapolis 500 drivers were checking their engines on Memorial Day weekend, Miller was in the field spraying — sometimes finishing after dark.

Field operations and decisions yet to come this spring at Laurel Ridge Farms include a trip through the soybean fields to spray a contact herbicide for weeds and a possible trip through the corn with a cultivator to knock out any last weed growth.

Miller also sampled the soil in fields where he spread manure last year to make sure there is enough nitrogen to nourish the plants. The late-spring nitrogen test allows him to apply only as much nitrogen as he needs, thus reducing both his costs and the impact of his fertilizer on groundwater.

So far, the corn crop looks pretty good, Miller said. Dry weather stressed the plants early on, but it also caused them to send down deep roots.

"You're ahead at the first turn, but that doesn't mean a darn thing," he said.

On a sunny day late last month, factors on and off the farm made the spring look pretty good so far, but they didn't necessarily have to do with the crop, Miller said.

Corn and bean prices had risen as much as commodities exchange rules allow them to in a single day, based on drought fears in the commodities markets.

But better still, Miller's impulse to have a touch of nature where he works was rewarded. This year, he put a duck nesting box in the pond near his farm yard that collects the rainwater and manure running off the outdoor hog pens. Last month, the box had new residents.

"Corn and beans are up the limit. It's a very pleasant day as far as humans and hogs are concerned," Miller said. "But the best thing for me (today) is 12 baby wood ducks on the manure lagoon."

Photos by DAN NIERLING / Courier Photo Editor



Clear skies provided perfect planting weather this spring. Miller met Rodney Degener in the fields last month to fill up the planter with a wagonload of soybeans.



Miller and Mike Webster, district conservationist for the Black Hawk County Soil Conservation Service, check the level of residue left from last year's crop by laying out a tape measure and counting each time a mark hits a fallen corn stalk.

A helping hand with an eye on the environment

Crop consultants play valuable role as farmers' experts in the field

By BILL SLAKEY

CEDAR FALLS — A motorcycle buzzing through their 6-inch tall corn plants might send some farmers through the roof, but it's a reassuring sight for John Miller.

It means crop consultant Kay Connelly is working in the fields, scouting for pests, checking on the crop's progress and focusing a lifetime's knowledge on this year's unique set of problems.

"I depend on Kay to go out there," Miller said. "Yeah, I've got a pretty good feel for what's going on, but two heads are better than one. ... Like any business, I depend on the people who've got the expertise."

From helping draft a detailed farm plan each winter to scouting for insects and weeds each spring, Connelly plays a vital role in growing crops wisely and efficiently at Laurel Ridge Farms and has for 15 years, Miller said.

By making sure field work, chemicals or fertilizer are used properly, Connelly's work contributes to the farm's bottom line — but it also helps reduce the farm's impact on the environment, Miller said.

On a hot afternoon last month, for example, Connelly circulated through the fields, eyeballing corn

plants and stopping occasionally to dig up one and check the roots.

If pests like cutworms or seed corn maggots were present — they weren't — he would note the problem and recommend treatment if it were severe enough. If both corn and weeds were growing rapidly — they were — he might recommend treatment soon.

"Timing is a big, critical factor," Connelly said. "You can do the same thing today and the same thing next week. One time it will work and one time it won't. But it costs the same amount either way."

Earlier in the month, Connelly said conditions were perfect for pulling out the rotary hoe, a cultivation tool that works best on weeds before they've popped out of the soil.

Miller could have waited and caught emerging grass plants with a specific herbicide, but it would have cost about \$15 an acre, Connelly said. The cost of rotary hoeing is \$4.40 per acre and the hoe puts fewer chemicals in the environment. But it was more work on a day when Miller already had plenty to do.

"I fought kicking and screaming to hooking up the rotary hoe. But that's what we call him in for," Miller laughed.



A motorcycle helps crop consultant Kay Connelly cover ground as he scouts fields for pests, weeds and ways to improve the effectiveness of all the work that goes into the crop.

The early part of the growing season is most critical — Connelly will visit Miller's fields three or four times during June and a few more

times through the summer.

The consulting doesn't end with the growing season either. Miller and Connelly will sit down three times in

the winter to draft a comprehensive plan for the entire farm, looking at the capabilities of different soils and figuring out how much yield to

expect and how much fertilizer to use.

Connelly also thinks long and short term on his visits to the field, looking for small adjustments that can improve the crops or ways that different treatments could be improved.

It may make only a 10 to 20 bushel per acre difference in yield in a good year, but that 20 could all be profit, he said.

Connelly started consulting after years as a field specialist with Iowa State University Extension Service. He works with about 30 other farmers — the maximum he can handle and still give the service he wants. He also trains other crop scouts and does other consulting work with ISU.

Consulting has become more popular as profit margins tighten for farmers — but it could spread wider, he said. About 10 percent of Iowa farmers use some consulting service, but only 2 percent use a detailed farmwide plan like Miller's, he estimated.

The main motivation is improving efficiency and improving profits, but farmers are also very concerned with reducing their impact on the environment, he said.

"They're very up-front about it. They have to make money," he said. "But if they have an option, they'll use the one that doesn't affect the groundwater."

DAN NIERLING / Courier Photo Editor