

One Farmer's Almanac



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



DAN NIERLING / Courier Photo Editor
In the summer, John Miller and Mike Webster, Black Hawk County district conservationist for the Soil Conservation Service, sheared trees in the farm windbreak.

Bare earth means turning fields into possibilities

Post-harvest period offers unique opportunity to improve the land

By BILL SLAKEY
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CEDAR FALLS — To city dwellers, the time following harvest might seem like a chance for farmers to rest.

But at many operations, including Laurel Ridge Farms south of Cedar Falls, bare fields present an opportunity to help the environment.

As crops disappear, it's an excellent time to build terraces, the most visible in a variety of erosion- and water-control strategies, said Cedar Falls farmer John Miller.

"There's an old saying in conservation. You don't want water running off the field, you want to walk it off," Miller said. "And you want to walk it off where you want it to go."

Controlling water runoff is one of the central conservation efforts at Laurel Ridge Farms. But the word "conservation" covers many areas, Miller said. From leaving crop residues in the field to planting trees in the windbreak to putting a goose nest in the farm pond, conservation of all kinds is a year-round effort.

Late last month, Dan Schmitz, of Don Schmitz and Sons earth moving contractors in Washburn, was doing his part to help slow water to a walk.

Using a large yellow bulldozer — a sight more typical for a road crew than a farm — Schmitz scraped topsoil away from the area where he would build a terrace.

Once he'd exposed the clay subsoil, he built a low, narrow ridge across the slope of the field. Because the terrace breaks a long slope into a number of shorter ones, it will keep water from picking up too much speed as it runs downhill, Miller said. That keeps water from causing too much damage.

When the terrace was finished, Schmitz replaced the topsoil. Eventually, grass will cover both its sides, Miller said. When heavy rains rush downhill, the terrace will divert water to grassed headlands at its edges or to tile intakes that drain the field.

This "narrow-based" terrace is one of a number of different types on the farm, he said. Others include "broad-based" terraces, which are wide and gradual enough to have crops planted over them, and "grassed back slope" terraces with crops planted on one side.

No-till doesn't mean no terrace

Terraces are important, because they accomplish a different job than "no-till" and "mulch-till" practices that leave crop residues on the fields, Miller said. While residue can help stop field-wide "sheet" erosion, it won't stop gullies from forming when a large quantity of water runs downhill, he said.

Terraces are also more effective in the long run than establishing and maintaining grassed waterways, he said.

"There is some feel that with the tillage now, the no-till and so forth, we don't need terraces. I think that's probably anything but true," he said.

That doesn't mean Miller ignores conservation tillage — it's just the opposite in fact. He learned to plow along the contours of the hill from his father and left crop residue in the fields long before it was fashionable.

This fall, Miller will till some of his cornfields with a chisel



RICK CHASE / Courier Staff Photographer
Conserving soil and enhancing wildlife habitat take attention in all seasons at Laurel Ridge Farms in Cedar Falls. After harvest in the fall, John Miller breaks up potential soil compaction in some fields with a chisel plow.



BRANDON POLLOCK / Courier Staff Photographer
With crops out of the field this fall, Dan Schmitz built terraces in some fields at Laurel Ridge. The earthen terraces break a long slope into shorter sections so rainwater never builds up enough speed to cause gullies.

plough carrying 2-inch-wide points. The narrow points are designed to leave as much residue as possible on the surface.

"Some people starting no-till worry about leaving too much residue on the field. It's a psychological barrier," he said. "My concern is always having enough."

Miller said he hasn't gone entirely to no-till planting because of worries about soil compaction. He spreads manure from his hogs

That's well below the five tons per acre considered tolerable by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service.

Habitat of trees

Conservation efforts at Laurel Ridge also extend to the windbreak around the house. Trees ranging from giant old pines to young red cedars shelter the farmstead from wind and snow on three sides.

The trees also offer shelter to wildlife. But maintenance and new planting is required, Miller said.

Because older trees can lose their lower limbs as they mature, new trees must be added fairly frequently to protect the understory where birds and other wildlife seek shelter, he said. The understory also stops wind and snow.

"The first tree I planted, I was 13 years old, which is 40 some years ago," he said. "You have to be kind of an optimist when you plant a 6-inch seedling, but they do grow up."

Some of the grove of trees was added in the 1960s, when the farm's pastures and fence rows were taken out, he said.

"When we made the changes in the late '60s and early '70s to go to mostly row crop and the fences came out, we tried to establish

some better quality wildlife habitat in the place of the fence rows," he said. "Thus we've got the pond and the grove and our north pasture."

"It always does my heart good when I walk through there and kick out a bunch of pheasants or partridge. I've got a screech owl in a bird-house out there," he said.

Habitat for adaptable species like pheasants and deer has been increasing in recent years — in part through the efforts of groups like Pheasants Forever and Ducks Unlimited. Idle land where habitat improvement projects could go forward is plentiful, he said.

Wildlife diversity

However, would-be conservationists should also think about some of the less visible species, he said.

"I had one person say to me there's more wildlife now than

there was when I was a kid — and I'm sure there's more deer and there's probably more pheasants and so forth," he said. "But that's only part of it. Those are species that adapt very well. There are species that certainly cannot stand the pressure of man and crops and all that sort of thing."

Miller said the diversity of wildlife on his own farm makes work more pleasant year round and ties together many different conservation efforts.

For example, a one-acre pond in the middle of his fields helps slow down water and hold it. But the pond also has a goose nesting platform and a wood-duck nesting box Miller installed this spring. The wildlife drawn to the pond make farming more enjoyable, Miller said.

"Going back and forth in the field riding a tractor is pretty boring. That's why I always like farming near the pond," Miller said.

"If you're playing percentages, you've got 27,000 corn plants per acre ... you've seen plenty of corn plants," he said. "If you can see something different it sure breaks the boredom and monotony."



DAN NIERLING / Courier Photo Editor
In early spring, Miller and his partner Larry Green installed a wood-duck nesting box at the one-acre pond in the Laurel Ridge fields.

1994: An excellent season closes early

CEDAR FALLS — An excellent growing season and good fall weather have kept harvest running smoothly this year at Laurel Ridge Farms.

The grain being harvested is in excellent condition, yields look very good and the weather has cooperated to keep harvest on schedule. Given conditions last year, it's a welcome triple crown to the year, said John Miller.

"You have the goal to get done by the first of November," Miller said. "I can remember when the goal used to be to get done by Thanksgiving."

Modern equipment means farmers can bring in large amounts of grain fairly quickly when it isn't too muddy to get in the fields, he said. Miller's neighbor, Rodney Degener, custom harvests for Miller and other neighbors and has covered plenty of acres this fall.

"On Sunday, he was going five miles an hour combining," Miller said at the end of last month. "A thousand bushels of corn an hour is moving a lot of corn."

Yields also look good this fall. Miller estimated he's getting approximately 100 more bushels per acre of corn from his fields than last year, when wet weather all summer harmed the crops.

"We haven't gotten into our good corn yet," he laughed. "That's like saying we caught a four-pound bass, but the good ones are yet to come."

Storage space on the farm will be tight, but there should be enough for all his grain, he said. Given the low corn prices at harvest time, he's likely to store his corn for awhile and hope for prices to rise in the spring.

"I think I've got enough room," he said. "It looks like a year when storage will pay for itself."



RICK CHASE / Courier Staff Photographer
Since March, John and Mary Miller have received monthly visits from the Courier for stories following a farmer's work through the year.