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Harvest began early last week at Laurel Ridge Farms for John Miller, on the tractor, and Rodney Degener, in the combine. From now until the crop is safely stored, farmers will work as quickly as possible to beat the onset of winter weather.

Photos by DAN NIERLING / Courier Photo Editor

Semester at an end

By BILL SLAKEY
Courier Staff Writer

CEDAR FALLS — In the lifelong learning program called farming, final exams come each year in October.

For the next month or so, John Miller will be getting his grades back every day.

Which crop varieties produced the best yield; did weeds and pests take a toll on crops; did soil conservation practices do the job? The answers to many crucial questions are revealed as combines trundle through the fields.

"Really the harvest is the culmination," Miller said. "It's the testing time for how many things, including Mother Nature, were right. Obviously with Mother Nature involved we can't take all the credit or all the blame."

With rain sweeping across Iowa to end September, harvest was just starting last week at Laurel Ridge Farms south of Cedar Falls. That's fairly early, thanks to good growing conditions this summer; but it doesn't mean farmers won't be pushing, Miller said.

"When the grain is there to be harvested, you try to get it out," Miller said. "I think every farmer has a memory of bad conditions, so you push to get it done as fast as you can."

For Miller, the bad memory is a year when he didn't finish harvesting until February. Once snow gets on the crops, harvesting stops because snow

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

One Farmer's Almanac



can clog the combine. Significant accumulations will cover up soybean plants. Grain losses in the field and mental stress can be tremendous.

Farmers also race against the decay of the plants they're harvesting. The toll of some diseases and pests of summer — corn borers and root worms, for example — becomes most obvious in the fall. Weakened plants can topple in the wind or the ears can fall off, leaving precious grain out of reach of the combine.

"The drier the corn gets, it may well drop off; and you want that yield in the bin, not on the ground," Miller said.

As corn and beans dry out, they may also shatter as they are pulled into

the combine, further reducing yield.

With those potential problems in mind, fall is also a test for the seven varieties of corn and four of soybeans that Miller planted in the spring. In addition to their yield and the length of their growing seasons, different varieties are rated on factors like root and stalk strength and resistance to pests. Quality of the grain and how easily the corn kernels are separated in the combine are other considerations.

"Part of what you're looking at in the harvest is am I going to grow that variety next year," he said.

Above all, harvest can be an endurance test for both people and equipment — and it isn't a one-person job. Miller hires a neighbor, Rodney Degener, to harvest all his crops.

Although driving a combine is one of Miller's favorite jobs, paying Degener for the custom work makes economic sense, he said. First it lowers Miller's capital investment — he doesn't own the expensive piece of equipment, although he does pay machine costs by the acre. For Degener, the large investment in the combine is spread out over more acres.

Degener also brings expertise to the job. A trained mechanic who worked at a dealership before farming full time, he can fix the machine if it breaks down. He also gets optimum performance from the machine, Miller

said. "You don't just turn anybody loose on a \$100,000-plus piece of equipment, harvesting tens of thousands of dollars worth of grain," he said.

But custom work also increases the work load and the need for coordination. Degener harvests about 2,300 acres overall for himself, his father, his neighbor Ed Juhl, Miller and several others.

A support crew surrounds the person in the combine. As grain comes out of the field, it may be trucked straight to the grain elevator in town or back to bins on the farm. Degener's wife and mother often help with the driving.

"Because of the acres, Rod likes to dump on the go so the combine doesn't have to stop," Miller said. "So auger wagons with somebody driving a tractor are coming alongside. We're set up to run two auger wagons this year, so while one's filling the other's unloading into a holding bin at the farmstead. Of course that takes tractors and people."

The work crew also includes one person operating the corn dryer, Miller said. Corn must be dried before it goes into storage to keep from spoiling. Most farmers like to harvest with a maximum moisture content of 25 percent. To sell corn to the elevator and receive full price, a farmer must dry it to 15 percent.

Although drying occurs naturally as the corn sits in the field, there is a

trade-off because of falling ears and lost yield, Miller said.

At Laurel Ridge Farms, the corn dryer is set up to help smooth out the rush of the harvest, Miller said. A bin is set aside to hold wet corn, which means new corn doesn't need to come in every day.

"If Rod can come in and get me filled up in a little over a day, then I've got a number of days he doesn't have to be here and I can be drying corn," Miller said. "If you've got bad weather, you go like mad while the weather's good and then if you can't get in the field you just keep that dryer going. The bigger operators today, they've not only got big wet corn storage they've got big dryers. So they're really cranking through the corn."

This year, moisture levels look to be fairly low, which can mean significant savings, Miller said. The local elevator charges 2.45 cents a percentage point of moisture to dry a bushel of corn and also takes into account how much the corn shrinks as it dries.

Harvest also tests a farmer's preparations, he said. Even small maintenance — like having a wagon's tires inflated to the proper pressure — can help prevent agonizing delays. For the past few months, Miller has checked and overhauled motors and augers essential to the operation of the grain dryer.

Bins have also been cleaned out and

sprayed to get rid of any residual pests or spoilage from last year's crop.

But even with careful preparation, breakdowns happen and frustration levels can rise during the harvest.

"You've got a \$100,000 machine and a little \$40 part breaks," Miller said. "Just because it's worth a lot of money doesn't mean it's not going to break down."

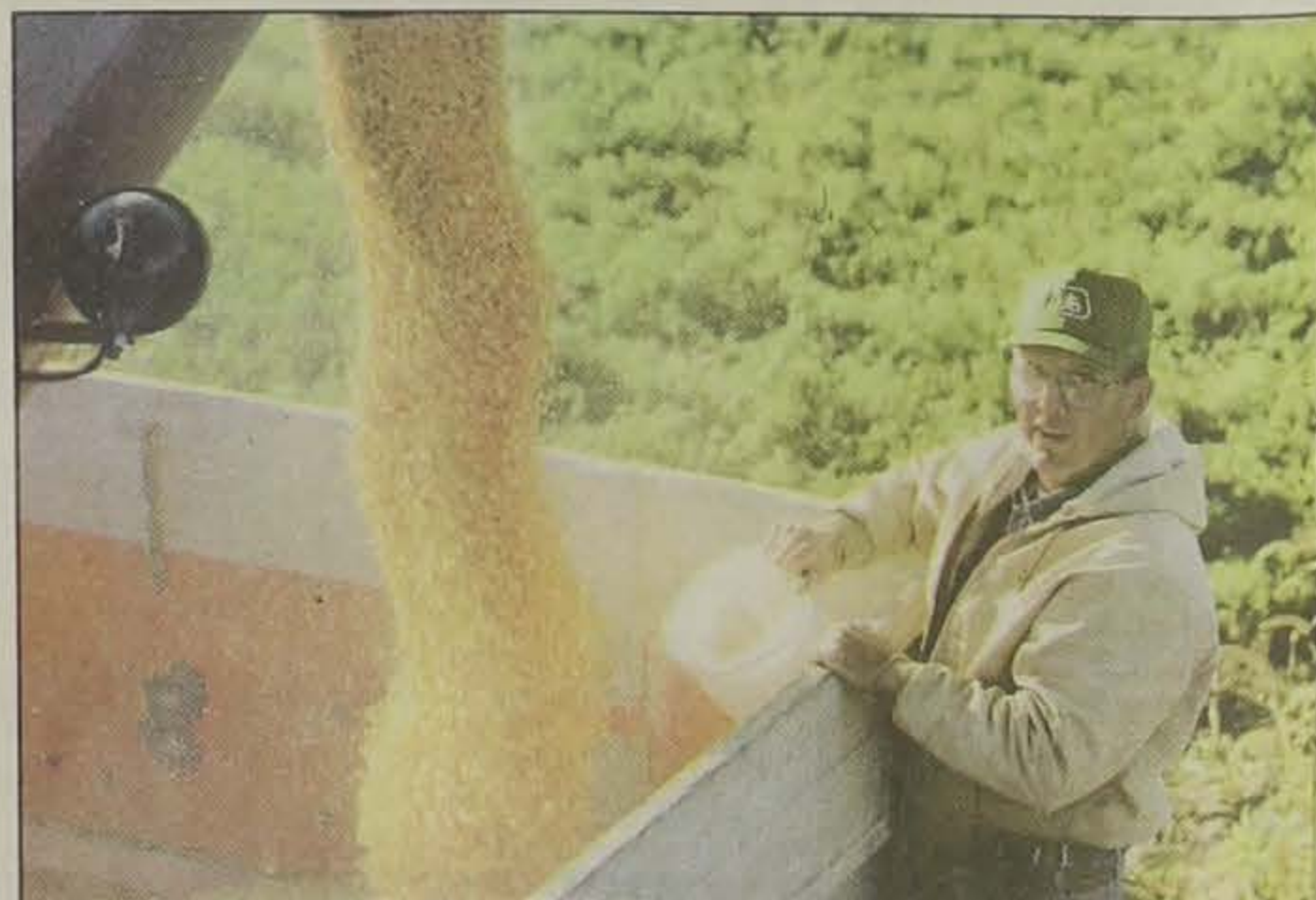
Miller also does yield tests in the fields when he has time. Degener will start the combine with an empty tank, harvest a set area and dump the grain into an empty wagon to be weighed. That way Miller can see the effect of myriad factors including soil type, crop variety and many others — essential information for next year's planning.

With pressure and long hours, it's hard to look at the harvest with unmixed satisfaction, Miller said. Watching the golden grain flow into the wagons doesn't always feel like the payoff for all the work.

"It's always nice to be done with winter coming. But there's always so much to do, that rightly or wrongly, it's just another job that's over," he said.

Even so, he wouldn't mind if the schedule of driving tractors, running the dryer, driving trucks and filling in when an extra hand is needed gives him a little actual harvesting to do.

"I just hope Rod lets me drive the combine a little bit this fall," he laughed.



As corn pours from the combine into a wagon, Miller takes a sample that will be checked for moisture level — one of the factors in determining when to harvest.



It's a world of corn from Degener's combine window. Degener custom harvests crops for Miller and a number of other area farmers. He'll cover more than 2,000 acres before the season is over.