

News Column

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GRAIN SORGHUM PRODUCTION

Thirty years after moving from western Kansas to this half of the state, I think I'm finally starting to adapt. While I haven't totally forgotten my dry-country upbringing, I have to admit that I think more now about the possibility of it being too wet to plant instead of too dry.

I will also confess to being delusional enough to take some of our eastern Kansas farming practices west,... and believing they will work. On my Phillips County farm, the 2017 corn crop will be my 7th in the last 8 years. And, this will be our 3rd attempt at growing soybeans.

While we have had reasonable success with corn out west, grain sorghum is still more common in that part of the state. Corn has taken over many of the sorghum acres in Riley County, and may take over more acres this year, after last year's challenges with sugarcane aphids and sorghum headworms.

Over time, grain sorghum has proven to be more consistent than corn, producing good yields every year instead of a great yield one year and an average yield the next. That's the reason many people like grain sorghum.

Grain sorghum is also a great backup plan if the weather doesn't cooperate and it gets too late to plant corn. We'd like to have corn planted in Riley County by mid-May. That's about when you could start planting sorghum, if you're in a hurry. And, if we finish planting grain sorghum by June 20, I expect it to beat the fall frost and yield as well as earlier planted sorghum.

Unlike corn, grain sorghum doesn't have to have a perfect stand to produce top yields.

We prefer an even stand, but grain sorghum is forgiving and will tiller to compensate for uneven plant spacing or poor emergence. My advice if you don't have a good planter that will space seed evenly, and at a constant depth, is to plant grain sorghum instead of corn. Corn needs an even stand.

We like a little higher plant population in the eastern half of the state than what is needed out west. In fact, one of my major challenges in my farming days was trying to get our drill set to plant a low enough population to avoid the drought stress that we so often experienced, before switching to no-till.

In far western Kansas a final population 24,000 to 35,000 plants per acre is recommended. In Riley County, where we expect 32 inches of rainfall annually instead of just 20 inches, we prefer a final population of 45,000 to 60,000 plants per acre.

To achieve the desired final stand, most Riley County producers drop 60,000 to 75,000 seeds per acre. I lean toward the lower end of that seeding rate, while also being pretty adamant about planting with a good, well-maintained planter. My dad seeded sorghum with a grain drill, but it didn't place the seed accurately enough. I greatly prefer a planter.

The seeding depth for grain sorghum should be about one inch in most soils. In sandy soil sorghum seed can be placed up to two inches deep without problems.

Once grain sorghum is established, success will be largely dependant upon rainfall, weed control, and a little luck. If we are lucky enough to have rain and cool weather during the week that our fields are flowering, then we'll have very good yields. If it is exceedingly hot during that week, then yields might take a hit.

Utilizing several planting dates is recommended to avoid having your entire crop flowering during the hottest, most stressful week of the summer.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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