



Experts talk soil health—Newsletter article #9

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'Home-grown innovation' needed for wide-spread cover crop use, expert says

Before World War II, most farmers included forage legumes like alfalfa and red clover in crop rotations ahead of nitrogen-demanding crops like corn. Forage grasses and small grains were also commonly used to curb soil erosion.

But according to Joel Gruver, a cover crop expert at Western Illinois University, cover crops fell out of favor during the rise of mechanized agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s—and increased again in the 1970's due to growing public concern about the environment combined with spikes in input costs.

Today, farmers are recognizing that cover crops, used in combination with no-till and diverse crop rotations, can significantly improve the health of their soil—and with it, the productivity and profitability of their farms.

“Modern agriculture’s cover crop pioneers have figured out how to make them work on their farms, with some impressive results,” Gruver says. “It’s going to take home-grown innovation by farmers who haven’t used cover crops to really ramp up their use. I say that because everyone’s situation is different; cover crops aren’t an ‘off the shelf’ practice that can be done the same way on every farm.”

While the basic principles of cover crops may stay the same, Gruver says the best genetics, establishment, and termination methods for individual farms can vary widely with respect to objectives, location, weather conditions, crop, soil types, and more.

“Fortunately, many of the farmers trying cover crops now are experienced no-tillers or strip-tillers who have a track record of doing the type of trouble shooting necessary to make cover crops work consistently,” Gruver says.

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