

A cover crop worth a look

By TOM J. BECHMAN

TIM Chattin pulled back corn residue so that green sprouts were easier to see. It was mid-fall, and annual ryegrass was emerging. Was it thick enough? Would it grow enough before winter, then thrive next spring?

Those are questions the Chattins can better answer this spring. However, based on what they saw on 40 acres a year ago, they planted more than 300 acres after harvest in 2005.

Tim and his brother, Ray, farm near Vincennes, Ind., in Knox County. They became intrigued with annual ryegrass when they saw how much cover it provided in plots on other innovators' farms. The Oregon Ryegrass Commission helped make plots possible. While the commission wants to promote ryegrass seed sales, results speak for themselves.

"No-tilling into the field was so easy last spring," Ray recalls. "And there were lots of roots. It provided all kinds

Key Points

- An annual ryegrass cover reduces nitrogen loss due to leaching.
- Utilizing a ryegrass cover takes strong farm management.
- Selecting proper herbicides for burndown is critical.

of soil protection. Plus, we believe it will help soil structure."

What impresses the Chattins most is how it might impact crop nutrients. "We're told that it takes up nutrients, such as nitrogen, that could otherwise be lost," Ray says. "Later, nutrients are released back to the soil."

Interest is so high in ryegrass cover that Indiana's Knox County Soil and Water Conservation District obtained a \$300,000 grant to promote it. "We intend to sell the value of annual ryegrass here," says Troy Hinkle of the Knox County SWCD. "We don't want to let this opportunity go by."

Grant money helped the district get

a Phoenix harrow. The Chattins ran a Phoenix harrow across fields after broadcasting ryegrass seed with fertilizer last fall.

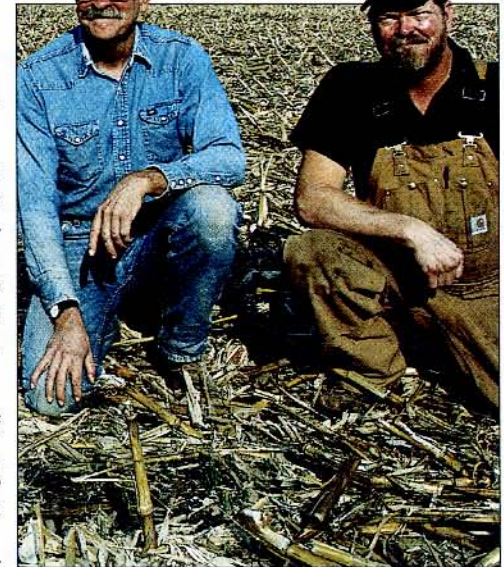
"We seeded with a John Deere 750 drill last year, but we needed to cover acres more quickly," Ray says.

Try covers again

One reason cover crops fell out of favor before was limited choices. Rye protected soil, but could leap out of control almost overnight in the spring.

Barry Fisher, executive director of the Indiana Conservation Tillage Initiative, has tried many cover crops, including ryegrass, on plots in Putnam County, Ind. He's looked at brassica (radish family), rapeseed, kale and forage turnips, drilled with oats. "Some of these winter-kill, and there's nothing left once earthworms feed," he observes. "The beauty is you don't need a burndown."

Annual ryegrass doesn't have that advantage. Still, like the Chattins, Fisher praises its benefits, and believes farmers will get a handle on management issues. That includes getting uniform stands. "If applied by air seeding, equipment must be calibrated correctly so that seed doesn't end up in narrow strips," he emphasizes.



EARLY GREEN: Green sprigs of annual ryegrass peeking through corn residue are a welcome site to Tim and Ray Chattin.

If there's a concern with annual ryegrass, it's that timing of kill is still key, Ray says. While it may not explode overnight like cereal rye, ryegrass grows quickly. And Ray has found it can be challenging to knock down.

Fisher prefers Roundup (glyphosate) or Roundup plus 2,4-D to burn it down. Atrazine may not be effective, he cautions.

Weed specialists in Kentucky add an extra note of caution: They're concerned annual ryegrass could be difficult to take out if it makes its way into fields where it's not wanted.