

Free fertilizer

Cover crops offer up to 100 pounds of nitrogen per acre for this Ohio grower

By Denny Eilers

While other farmers worry about increasing costs – especially nitrogen fertilizer costs – Carroll, Ohio, farmer David Brandt is sleeping better these days.

Brandt harnesses a cover crop farming system that helps him create between 100 and 120 pounds of nitrogen in every acre going to corn.

The no-till farmer has fine-tuned his approach over 30 years so his soils have more tilth, more organic matter, and less compaction. “Even without the extra nitrogen, I’d still use cover crops,” he says. “You can’t put a value on improving your soil.”

He does, however, measure yield increases, and he reports they run 7% to 15% more with covers, depending on the crop and the year.

“The right cover, in the right place, at the right time, can boost your yield and cut your expenses,” he says. “The cheapest place to cut your fertilizer bill is in your own field.”

NO-TILL IS KEY TO HIS SUCCESS

Brandt farms about 2,000 acres divided into thirds of corn, soybeans, and winter wheat. He switched to no-till farming in 1971, and he started experimenting with cover crops in 1979. He liked what he saw, and in the 1980s expanded and experimented with a variety of cover crops to improve soil structure, add nutrients, and increase yield for the next crop in the rotation.

Brandt uses a regular corn her-



Photograph: Denny Eilers

“I like to let the shovel do the talking,” says David Brandt showing off the outstanding tilth that cover crops provide for him. A variety of cover crops combined with no-till has allowed the Carroll, Ohio, farmer not only to reduce nitrogen applications but also to boost yields.

bicide at planting and reports that the cover crop and herbicide timing combination eliminates many broadleaf problem weeds in his area, including giant ragweed.

HIGHLY ERODIBLE SLOPES

On highly erodible slopes, Brandt plants hairy vetch to control erosion and also to gain cover benefits. In addition to keeping erosion in check, vetch produces between 10,000 and

15,000 pounds of organic matter per acre and creates almost as much nitrogen as winter pea.

Last year Brandt got 175 to 185 bushels per acre of corn, 55 bushels per acre of beans, and 94 to 95 bushels per acre of wheat. Wheat is critical to Brandt’s cover crop program because it’s planted in the fall following soybeans. “Nothing works as a cover following beans to build nitrogen for corn because there isn’t enough growing time,” he says. ■



learn more

David Brandt, 5100 Basil Western Road, Carroll, OH 43112
740/756-4436 | BrandtFarms@yahoo.com