

Treating Cover Crops Like Cash Crops – Steve Groff

by Blair Andrews

It's not hard to spot Steve Groff's philosophy for farm management – the slogan on his hat says it all: "Soil is meant to be Covered."

Steve Groff is known for pioneering the Permanent Cover Cropping System, emphasizing no-till, cover crops and crop rotations. Seventy of his 200 acres of vegetables have been under no-till for the past 15 years – and some of his fields have not seen tillage for more than 35 years.

He strongly believes in covering the fields with crop residues and cover crops to ensure that something is living in the soil at all times. The system is used to reduce pesticides, enhance soil quality, provide nitrogen, reduce erosion and increase profits.

While he said most people in the room would agree that planting cover crops is a good idea, there are several challenges involved in making them feasible. "It's a bunch of little things; usually a lot attention to details and timing. It comes down to management" said Groff. The key to making them work Groff suggests is for farmers to treat cover crops as if they were cash crops.

His first suggestion was to consider planting a cover crop cocktail – a mixture of several species of cover crops planted together. As planting conditions vary from one year to the next, the mixture guards against the failure of one species. "We can take advantage of the averages. We never know what the fall will bring; we never know what the perfect crop will be to plant in a certain situation," said Groff. Calling it "crop rotation on steroids," he said the mixture creates another benefit of adding diversity to the soil.

Groff has also discovered that plants work in synergy, which means he can cut seeding rates to save money.

In one on-farm trial he is researching, Groff planted a mixture of more than 10 different species, including tillage radish, sunflower, blue lupin, Austrian winter pea, fava bean, phacelia, early cover, hairy vetch, common vetch, sunn hemp, fenugreek and calendula. Noting that he wasn't telling his audience to plant a similar mixture, Groff said farmers should consider a combination of four or five different species.

"We're at the forefront of cover crops here. So we're at the point of learning what works best," said Groff. As with cash crops, he said it is also important to plant cover crops in a timely manner. He recommended that farmers set a priority and have a plan in place to plant cover crops after harvest, suggesting that hiring an additional person or a neighbour to plant the crops, if necessary.

For more on Steve Groff and his Permanent Cover Cropping System, visit:

www.cedarmeadowfarm.com.

For a copy of Steve's presentation go to the Innovative Farmers Association of Ontario website at

www.ifao.com.