January 2014 Newsletter

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Cover Crop Resources:

Where to Find the Answers to your Questions.
Written by Woody Woodruff

Are you thinking about adding cover crops to your farming operation but just don't know where to begin? What cover crop species should I plant and when? When should I terminate the cover crops? What are the benefits? What are the risks? Where can I find answers that fit my type of farming operation? We are beginning to see an increase in on-line information to help farmers answer these questions.

One of the best references is the: "Cover Crop Decision Tool," on the Midwest Cover Crops Council (MCCC) website. It is a free online tool that gives you answers to which cover crops are best used in your specific county and in targeting the benefits that you are wanting from cover crops. It is also specific to each type of cash crop you will be growing. The goal of the MCCC is to make this website the one location that you will access for all your specific cover crop decisions.

Another useful tool is the book "Managing Cover Crops Profitably 3rd Edition." You can purchase the book at the link above for $19.00 or simply
download the free online file version. This book has a wealth of information for corn and soybean farmers as well as specialty crop farmers. The one downside of referring to a book as apposed to a website is that a book can become outdated while websites can constantly update and publish new material. Because of this particular characteristic of websites, it is my opinion that the seeding rates are more up to date on the Midwest Cover Crop tool. It is also easier to tailor those rates to your specific needs.

At the Illinois Stewardship Alliance website you can also find a: "Cover Crops: Directory of Businesses 2014." This directory has Illinois Cover Crop Seed Dealers, as well as Aerial applicators.

Another useful resource might be your local fertilizer service company. More and more are investing in equipment to deal with cover crop application in standing crops like corn and soybeans. Check with your local farm service provider to see if they have the equipment to handle your cover crop needs.

Lastly, the Illinois USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), Illinois Department of Agriculture as well as Illinois Stewardship Alliance are compiling lists of Cover Crop Farmers that have successfully made the transition to applying cover crops into their farming operation. These farmers' operations are being listed for your reference on each of the different agencies' and organizations' websites. These farmers are attending the local cover crop field days, seminars, and coffee shop farmer round table discussions that are being held around the state. New cover crop trainers have been trained to outreach the information on a more local level. Call your local county Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) to see when they have scheduled an upcoming cover crop educational event. If your county does not have one scheduled for 2014, please have them email: woody@ilstewards.org. Illinois Stewardship Alliance and your local SWCD will work on developing a program for your county as soon as possible.

If you are looking to enroll in a conservation program to receive assistance from your County NRCS or SWCD, please do not delay. The amount of money allocated to the new budget in the USDA Farm Bill is likely to be less than in the past, and could continue to shrink in program dollars.

Conservation Stewardship Program Deadline Extended

You Still Have Time to Apply!
The USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service has extended the deadline for new enrollments in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) for the fiscal year of 2014. Producers interested in participating in the program can submit applications to their local Natural Resource Conservation Service
Eligible landowners and operators can also enroll in CSP through February 7th to be eligible during the fiscal year 2014. While local NRCS offices accept CSP applications year round NRCS only evaluates the applications during the announced ranking periods. Therefore, you need to have your application submitted by February 7th to be ranked for the fiscal year of 2014.

We are fairly sure that the budget for Conservation programming and service will be seeing budget cuts in the upcoming Farm Bill. The most certain acceptance into the Conservation Stewardship Program will be right now. So if you are interested in this program, please do not delay in signing up. Acceptance for future rankings could be more difficult. Please visit ISA's website for more CSP information.
The FruitGuys Community Fund, established in 2012 as a non-profit project of Community Initiatives, is pleased to announce funding to support sustainability projects for small to mid-size farms. This new fund grew out of the sustainable farming grants of The Farm Steward Program of The FruitGuys, a national fruit distribution company based in South San Francisco. A primary goal of the FruitGuys Community Fund is to help farms and orchards operate more sustainably and to promote advocacy that, over the long term, creates a more sustainable food system and healthier planet.

Grants in the amount of $2,500-$5,000 will be awarded in April 2014. Preference will be given to applicants within 150 miles of San Francisco, Philadelphia, or Chicago. Projects to be considered should help farms and orchards operate more sustainably, both environmentally and economically, as well as strengthen community outreach. Some examples of the sustainability projects may include (but are not limited to): planting of cover crops to help with water management and soil fertility; planting pollinator-attracting perennials and/or installing bee hives; installation of bat boxes or owl boxes to attract predators and keep rodent numbers down; installation of high tunnels or hoop houses to extend the growing season. Within the total project budget, up to 10% of the total grant awarded (i.e. up to $500) may consist of funding to support the community outreach, education, and/or advocacy as outlined in question 4 of the grant application. Projects must be completed by December 1, 2014.

Grant applications are due by midnight, February 15, 2014.

Article property of The Fruit Guys Community Fund.

Cover Crop Service Provider Training Review

Written by: Woody Woodruff

I just finished an intensive Cover Crop Specialist Training at Illinois Central College January 8th & 9th. The Illinois Council on Best Management Practices, under the direction of Cover Crop Specialist for Illinois C-BMP Michael Plumer, organized the training. The intent of the training was to develop a small group of cover crop service providers and champion farmers to meet periodically to determine what is and is not working. By sharing farmer experiences and accurate knowledge on cover crops during these training sessions, we will enable new cover cropping farmers to make better production decisions that produce more profitable experiences.
Mike Plumer opened the training by explaining his decades of research with cover crops and specifically annual rye grass. The potential for annual rye grass in a cover crop program is outstanding. Annual rye grass acts as a nutrient sequencer and weed suppressor, as well as aiding in water conservation during the growing season, and it can be terminated with ease. To add to its many uses, annual rye grass also works well in mixes.

The next presenter was Barry Fisher, State Soil Health Specialist with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS.) According to Barry, making soil health a priority is the key to increased yields in your crop rotation. Understanding and optimizing every aspect of the conservation cropping system improves soil function as well as boosts yields.

One aspect of soil health is the amount of carbon in the soil. Carbon works as earth's filtration system. There is no better contamination filter than carbon, so we all benefit when we install conservation practices like no-till and cover crops that build carbon as they break down in the soil.

A basic conservation corn & soybean cropping system should include: first, no-tilling cereal rye into corn stubble; second, no-tilling a relatively early soybean into the rye and trying to plant your soybeans as early as you can; third, planting a nitrogen catching cover crop mix like oats, crimson clover, and tillage radish. By planting a low carbon:nitrogen ratio mix, nitrogen is released in a timely manner, benefiting the corn throughout the growing season.
Jerry Kaiser, Plant Material Specialist at the NRCS Plant Material Center explained the uses of the different cover crop species. Jerry showed photos, and described the species characteristics of cool season broad leafs, grasses, cereals, and legumes. He described planting dates, cash crop benefits, soil adaptation, price range, and seeding rates. The Plant Material Center in Elsberry, Missouri runs trials of different cover crop combinations in a multitude of plots. The center holds field days during the summer.

Joel Grover from Western Illinois University Agriculture Department covered information on seeding methods, issues, & problems. Joel also explained how to use the Cover Crop Decision Tool from the Midwest Cover Crop Council. Dr. Gruver's advice is to start planning for next fall's cover crops at least 10 months ahead! Anticipate the short length of the planting window. Match your objectives with the proper species mix. Confirm your species availability as soon as possible. Make sure that your equipment is ready ahead of time. Identify realistic ways of termination specific to your particular cover crop choice. Allocate labor dedicated to just planting the cover crop. Develop contingency plans just in case a problem with the weather arises.
Dr. Shalamar Armstrong, Associate Professor of Soil Science and Agronomy at ISU was the last to speak. He has been conducting cover crop research with cereal rye and tillage radish in a conventional corn cropping system. The research plots also have a fall application of anhydrous ammonia. What did he learn? Both tillage radish and cereal rye demonstrate the potential to absorb a full rate of fall applied nitrogen. Fall application of nitrogen into a standing cover crop mix significantly reduces nitrate leaching. Cover crops impacted the distribution of spring inorganic nitrogen as they breakdown. Weather influences how well cover crops impact spring soil mineralization by being too warm or too cool in this process.

In both years of his research, tillage radish treatment resulted in significantly greater inorganic nitrogen compared to the control and the cereal rye. Early mineralized nitrogen is susceptible to loss by leaching and denitrification.

Terry Taylor was our final speaker. He is a farmer that has been cover cropping for about a decade. Terry has not been afraid to try different cover crop mixes, in different seeding rates, and at different seed spacings. Terry has had a positive impact on the farmers and conservationists that have seen his success in his farming operation. Some say Terry plants corn and beans just for something to do till cover crop season begins again. Farmers like Terry are the key to cover crop adoption in Illinois.
Late Fall Cover Crop

2014 Conservation Cropping Seminars Near You!

Curious about Cover Crops? Want to learn more about soil health? Mark your calendars for three new Conservation Cropping Seminars coming to your area and don't miss out on these great opportunities to learn more about cover crop best practices and implementation. Learn More!

Bring Cover Crops to Your Area!

If you are an Agricultural Service Provider that is starting to work with cover crops and would like to learn more for your staff and your patrons about the uses of cover crops, please contact the Illinois Stewardship Alliance.

Upcoming Events!

Feb 1 Sheep and Goat Workshop
9:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m. at Kankakee Community College. A pre-registration fee of $20 (includes lunch) for the workshop is required by January 24.
Feb 1 Approaches to Small-Scale Farm Composting Webinar
There is no charge to attend, but you need to register for the webinar. Learn More.

Feb 6 Organic Pest Management: Insects Webinar
There is no charge to attend, but you need to register for the webinar. Learn More.

Feb 8 Community Garden and Urban Farming Workshop
University of Illinois Extension, along with other partners, will host a community gardening and urban farming workshop on Feb. 8, from 8:45 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. (registration starting at 8:15 a.m.) at the Illinois Department of Agriculture, Springfield, IL. The event is also sponsored by Illinois Department of Agriculture, genHkids, Illinois Stewardship Alliance, The Neighborhood Gardens, and the Springfield Community Garden Family Fit Center. The workshop will serve as an opportunity for those who already manage or garden at community gardens or urban farms, or those who are interested in learning more, to meet and share best practices. Participants will hear from speakers from Springfield and East St. Louis. The plenary speaker is Vera Garrett, from Springfield Community Garden, Springfield, IL. Learn More.

Feb 13 Organic Pest Management: Disease Webinar
There is no charge to attend, but you need to register for the webinar. Learn More.

Feb 14 Fruit Tree Pruning Hands On Workshop
Join professor Mosbah Kushad from the University of Illinois Department of Crop Sciences for a hands-on workshop on how to prune your fruit trees. Please bring pruning sheers. A limited number will be available for those that do not have their own. Workshop will be held at PrairiErth Farm outside of Atlanta. Learn More.

February 19 Central Illinois Composting Symposium
This symposium, held at the Lincoln Land Community College Green Center, brings together composters, educators, and businesses so that everyone can learn about composting organic materials and resources. A Build Your Own Bin (BYOB) workshop will help participants construct their own vermicomposting bin for use at home, work, or school. For more information: 217-786-4993 ormarnie.record@llcc.edu. Learn More.

Feb 20 Organic Pest Management: Weeds Webinar
There is no charge to attend, but you need to register for the webinar. Learn More.

February 27 - March 1 MOSES Organic Farming Conference
Registration for the 25th annual MOSES Conference has begun! This three day
event in Lacross, WI is the country's largest about organic and sustainable farming.
Learn More.

March 1-2 Illinois Products Expo
Orr Building, Illinois State Fairgrounds, Springfield, IL
Over 70 Illinois companies will be providing free food samples and selling their products. A few non-food items, such as soy & herb candles and agricultural-based soaps/lotions will also be available to purchase. The Illinois Wine and Cheese Garden will once again be a featured attraction at the Expo. Illinois wineries will participate; selling wine samples and wine by the glass and the bottle. "Illinois Products" gift baskets will also be given away as door prizes.
Learn More.

For a complete listing of upcoming events, please checkout our Events Calendar on the ISA website.

Have an event that should be included on our event lineup? Email Molly at molly@ilstewards.org.

Get Involved

Donate
ISA is a non-profit organization. Your donations help us to continue our work in promoting local foods, fair policies, and conservation agriculture.
Donate Now

Become a Member
Be part of an Alliance of consumers, farmers and other local food system stakeholders working to increase production and consumption of local foods in Illinois.
Learn More

Spread the word!
When you send this email to a friend, like us on Facebook, follow us on Twitter, or connect with us on LinkedIn, you are helping to increase awareness about local food causes in your community. Be a part of the movement and spread the word!

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