



Experts talk soil health—Newsletter article #11

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Expert urges farmers to ask—and answer—five questions before cover cropping

Joel Gruver is Western Illinois University's go-to cover crop guy. He has worked with many farmers who are using cover crops, and he has tested cover crops on University plots. He understands that farmers considering soil health-building cover crops should go in with eyes wide open.

As a result, Gruver has a long list of questions a farmer should ask—and answer—before the first cover crops are planted. Five of the most important questions are:

1. What equipment is available (owned, available for rent or custom hire) to seed cover crops in my area?
2. What windows of opportunity exist as defined by weather and climate, current cropping practices, cover crop genetics—and can current windows be expanded by acceptable adjustments like shorter season crops or alternative cover crops?
3. How will I terminate the cover crop and achieve an acceptable stand of the next crop?
4. Will I have the time and labor to make this work?
5. What's my contingency plan—and risks—if the cover crop doesn't establish or doesn't die on schedule?

“Cover crop management today isn't just a revisiting of old practices abandoned by the fathers and grandfathers of today's farmers,” he says. “Innovative large-scale grain farmers have started integrating cover crops into their production systems in ways that were never even considered before.”

For more information on how to “Unlock the Secrets in Your Soil,” call or visit your local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service office or visit www.nrcs.usda.gov.

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