

Strip-Till Practice Benefits from Cover Crop Mix

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Brooks Shanklin, a Toluca, IL, grower, began using cover crops in 2010. The first year experience was disappointing due to the weather and timing of his airflow seeding. Rather than give up, however, he went "whole hog" on it this fall, seeding all 450 acres in a mixture of annual ryegrass, crimson clover and radish.

The Shanklin farm has been in continuous no-till since 1999 and he began to strip-till four years ago as part of an effort to improve consistency of stands and to increase harvest yields in his corn-on-corn operation. "I didn't really want to strip till," he said, "but emerging corn plants in the spring don't like any residue. The strip-till row provides a cleaner environment for planting and the lack of residue around the new corn plant gives me a more even stand."

This year's effort with annual ryegrass, crimson clover and radish is already showing success, with a few inches of top growth going into winter and roots going much deeper. His neighbor planted the same mix on his fields and is seeing even more lush results due to additional nitrogen he added just after harvesting the corn, something Shanklin says he'll try next year.



"The annual ryegrass is a scavenger of N, as is the radish," Shanklin continued. "Clover produces nitrogen and thus this is a great cover crop mix for creating added N for the corn crop next year. This mixture also improves soil health and fertility by adding organic matter and deepening the reach of crop roots, air and water."



Shanklin planted his cover crops by airplane this year, the first week of September, while the corn was still maturing in the field. Once it was established, he came back through with a new Kraus Gladiator strip-till tool to establish the seed bed for next year. With an 8-inch swath open in each 30" row, the cover crops will keep the water and soil in place this winter. In the spring, Shanklin will burn down the annual ryegrass before planting corn. This will allow him good weed control early and a clean strip, through which he'll run his planter equipped with row cleaners and in-furrow fertility. Shanklin continues to look for and implement best management practices such as these in his family farming operation, of which one homestead is a "Century Farm."

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