Preparing to Grow Lentils

Lentil prices have been high and more farm producers in Alberta are considering lentil production this year. A member of the legume plant family, lentils fixate nitrogen for their own well-being as well as leaving some residual N in the soil for future crops. Adding lentil to a crop rotation breaks disease cycles of traditional crops, introduces an alternative rooting system to the soil, decreases the N fertilization requirement and provides a different market opportunity. However, first-time lentil producers should use caution as this crop has unique characteristics.

“The average yield of a lentil crop is 1,200 pounds per acre with first time growers generally achieving 2/3 of this yield,” says Neil Whatley, crop specialist with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. “Growing lentils in rotation with cereal crops is most successful because lentil rooting depth is shallower than wheat, allowing these crops to extract water from different soil depths. Thus, wheat grown after lentils is typically higher yielding and, due to residual soil N, generally attains high protein quality.”

Characteristics and sources of certified lentil varieties are documented in Alberta’s Seed Guide (www.seed.ab.ca). Availability of certified seed is diminishing due to large current demand, however, there continues to be some remaining in the province. The two seed sizes are Chilean/large-seeded (greater than 50 grams per 1000 seeds) and Persian/small-seeded (40 grams or less per 1000 seeds).

“The two main market classes are green and red lentils and this terminology can be a bit confusing because the green class is distinguished by a green seed coat colour and the red class is distinguished by a red cotyledon (seed leaf) colour, which is inside the seed,” says Whatley. “Green lentil seeds have yellow cotyledons. Lentils are a very poor weed competitor, so, depending on availability, Clearfield lentil varieties should be considered as Odyssey herbicide has a wide weed spectrum and is not hard on the crop. Clearfield varieties have the (CL) designation behind the variety name in the seed guide.”

Producers should be cautious of field selection. “When grown on soil with excess nitrogen or water at the time of seed set, lentil plants grow indeterminately; continuing to flower and grow vegetatively without setting seed,” says Whatley. “This plant characteristic can cause lower yields, higher disease

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incidence and higher frost risk. Under normal growing conditions properly inoculated lentil plants fix 80 per cent or more of the plant’s necessary N, so planting lentils on soil low in N is fine. In fact, too much N in the soil will prevent important N-fixing root nodulation.”

To avoid excess moisture at maturity, the most successful areas to grow lentils are in the drier Brown and Dark Brown soil zones. Growing lentils in the Black and Gray soil zones is not recommended except in the thin Black soil zone during years without excessive moisture. Red and small green lentil varieties are more determinate (less likely to grow vegetatively at maturity) and should be considered for the moist Dark Brown and thin Black soil zones, as well as on clay soils in the drier soil zones. Higher or sandy fields are preferable in wetter areas and should be considered when growing lentils in the thin Black soil zone.

“The lentil plant’s unique characteristics require special considerations at seeding time as well,” says Whatley. “In a future article, I will identify key agronomic guidelines to follow to achieve proper seeding depth, seeding rate, fertilization and land rolling.”

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**Capital Available to Alberta Producers and Agri-Businesses**

The Alberta government offers the province’s farms, commercial operations, agri-businesses and value added enterprises a means to access capital to grow and sustain their operations. Through loans, capital sourcing services and loan guarantees, the lending division of Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC) offers producers a consistent, stable source of capital.

The lending products offered by AFSC are tools to assist producers in expanding their farm operations or to start a new agri-business or value added enterprise. These products are here to help producers and support economic growth in Alberta.

More producers are taking advantage of the customized loan programs and flexible repayment options offered by the Crown corporation. AFSC’s lending division recorded a record year in 2009, lending over $372 million to individuals and processing over 1,700 new loans. This lending helped facilitate at total investment of $686 million into the agriculture, value-added and rural economies.

Changes to lending limits in 2009 allowed AFSC to better serve the industry and respond to the needs of the market. AFSC can lend up to $5 million for individuals. Additional benefits include flexible repayment options, low interest rates and the ability to repay your loan in full, at anytime, without penalty.

AFSC is a provincial Crown corporation that works with Alberta’s agriculture producers and commercial enterprises to ensure they have the access to capital they require to run a successful business. In addition to a range of lending products and services, AFSC delivers income stabilization programs and provides insurance products. With 50 offices across the province, AFSC has lending staff available to meet with clients to discuss their financing needs.

Lending products available include:

- **Alberta Farm Loan Program** - Designed to provide financing needed to start, develop and grow farming operations.
- **Value-Added & Agribusiness Program** - Provides customers with financing to start, develop and grow their agribusiness or value-added enterprise.
- **Commercial Loan Program** - Provides an alternative source of loan capital to individuals and commercial businesses in Alberta.
- **Specific Loan Guarantee Program** - Enables applicants to obtain financing from other lenders with the support of a Guarantee from AFSC.
- **Capital Sourcing Program** - Encourages the expansion of agriculture, agribusiness and commercial enterprises by sourcing required capital through other lenders.
- **Alberta Disaster Assistance Loan Program** - Designed to provide support to producers who have suffered an agriculture disaster.

For more information call AFSC at 1-877-899-AFSC (2372) or visit www.afsc.ca

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Everyone involved in the local market industry would agree that customer service is critical to the success of the business. And of course that makes sense because a key motivator for consumers purchasing from farmers’ markets and u-picks and farm stores is to recreate that connection with the grower and the land. In other words, they want to get to know who grew the carrots and raised the chicken and made the wine they are having for dinner.

“John Stanley Associates, an international marketing firm specializing in retail sales, recently released a survey that indicated 74.5 per cent of consumers feel customer service has deteriorated in the last five years,” says Eileen Kotowich, farmers’ market specialist with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. “Those are startling statistics but a definite opportunity for those selling in the local market industry to make a difference and keep the customers coming back.”

Donald Cooper, international marketing expert, recently spoke at the Alberta Farmers’ Market Association annual conference. One of his key messages revolved around customer service, “You bring such incredible joy to people’s lives, reconnecting us to something that is fundamental to our happiness — a feast for the eyes, the stomach and the soul. The farmers’ market is where you meet ‘real’ people so it’s important that you provide us with an extraordinary experience and extraordinary products that you can’t get anywhere else. We want the story about what we’re buying and we want the connection with the people who produced it. Otherwise, we’d just go to the mall.”

Cooper challenged the participants to think about what it feels like to be the customer. To think about the customer’s attitude and how a farm direct marketer can be extraordinary for them. He shared a story from his own business history when he ran a women’s clothing store. He started by looking at his business from the front door in and realized that retail businesses had long been conveying the message that their customers couldn’t be trusted. This really isn’t what marketers want to tell their customers, but consider some typical signage in retail outlets:

- **No food or drink allowed** — implies the customer is clumsy and will spill on the merchandise
- **Ask attendant for key to the change room** and **Only 3 garments allowed** — implies the customer might sneak in to a change room and somehow steal clothing

“Cooper encouraged participants to be different and not follow along with so-called societal norms just for the sake of doing it,” says Kotowich. “Consider any subliminally negative messages and how you can eliminate them. Put yourself out there and WOW your customers by thinking of the small details that make them feel appreciated and welcome in your business.”

Cooper provided many useful tips for creating that extraordinary experience:

- Make sure your business name is displayed proudly and that you and your staff have name badges. Don’t imply you are ashamed of your business or your staff.
- Take a page out of John Stanley’s book, *27 Ways to Improve Your Farmers’ Market Stall* by telling your customers the name and price of the product as well as three benefits or reasons they should purchase that product. Believe it or not, not everyone knows that certain varieties of potatoes are better for baking.
- Make it easy for the customer to buy and use your product which may mean “value adding” by washing or packaging products for convenience.
- Take the mystery out of what you do by telling your customers how you do it, i.e. provide recipes; provide information about your farming practices.
- Create a database of customer names so you can send out a newsletter to make your customers aware of what is happening in your business.
- Create a fabulous website that tells your unique story and helps build those relationships with your customers.

“I believe everyone wants to provide excellent customer service but sometimes we forget to look at it from our customers’ side of the counter,” says Kotowich. “As we go into a new market and farm season, try to look at your business differently. Small tweaks to how you operate can make a world of difference and add significantly to your bottom line.

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So You Want to Seed Forages This Spring

With the coming of spring, many producers are starting to think about their seeding plans for the upcoming season. For those contemplating putting in perennial forages, there are a few things to consider when deciding which species to seed.

“First things first; not all forage species work in all locations,” says Stephanie Kosinski, forage specialist with Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development. “Each species has certain characteristics that make them better adapted to grow in some areas than in others. For example, if you were in the Dark Brown soil zone, and did not have access to irrigation, you would not seed a grass like timothy for hay. Timothy has shallow roots, making it ill-suited to drier areas. On the other hand, the roots of crested wheatgrass extend deep into the soil, making it one of the best grasses for hay in those dry parts of the province.”

Pay attention not only to which grasses and legumes are suited to a soil zone, but also to the conditions in individual fields. Are there low spots that tend to be waterlogged? Are there salinity, acidity or alkalinity issues?

“Forage species can differ greatly in their ability to handle different field conditions,” says Kosinski. “I would recommend checking out forage species adaptation tables to help make your decision. They can be found on Alberta Agriculture’s website (www.agriculture.alberta.ca) and in the new Alberta Forage Manual, and in most forage seed company seed guides.”

In addition to selecting grass and legume species that are suited to a soil zone and field characteristics, the end use of the crop must be considered.

Smooth brome and meadow brome are two of the most commonly seeded grasses in the province. Which would you use for hay and which for pasture? Or does it even matter?

“Smooth brome is considered to be a ‘long shoot’ grass,” says Kosinski. “The leaves of smooth brome are attached to the central stem and stand tall, making it easy to cut and bale. On the other hand, the leaves of meadow brome are basal, making it a ‘short shoot’ grass. Smooth brome has slower regrowth and requires longer periods of rest than meadow brome. If you were looking to seed hay, which grass would be your first choice? I would hope it would be smooth brome. If you wanted to seed pasture, meadow brome would be best because of its quick regrowth. A hybrid of these two, called hybrid bromegrass is also available. It may be an option for producers looking to hay the first cut and graze the regrowth. Low-alkaloid reed canary grass is also another hay-graze option.

“If a field will be intensively managed and grazed, make sure to select species that require shorter rest periods and have fast regrowth. Orchard grass, meadow brome, tall fescue, Kentucky bluegrass, and creeping red fescue can handle shorter rest periods and growth rapidly after defoliation. Legumes, such as alfalfa, sweetclover, and alsike clover, have moderately fast regrowth and require a bit longer rest. And finally, those grasses best suited to hay, such as several of the wheatgrasses, timothy, and smooth brome, all have slow regrowth and require long rest periods between grazings, so they might not be the right choice for seeding by themselves in fields where you will be grazing hard without long rest periods.”

Many grasses can be stockpiled for fall grazing. Meadow brome, orchardgrass, western wheatgrass, tall fescue, Russian wildrye, Altai wildrye, and creeping red fescue maintain their quality well during the winter for stockpiled grazing. Cicer milkvetch and some of the clovers are also suited to stockpiling for late fall/early winter grazing. “Alfalfa may work if you are willing to swath graze it,” adds Kosinski. “Cut it after the first hard frost and graze once the ground is frozen. In some situations there can be risk of winterkill under the swaths. If you are looking to stockpile for grazing the following spring, choose grasses with basal leaves that will be protected from weathering by the snow.

“I said it once, and I will say it again; knowing what soil regions and field conditions grasses and legumes can handle, as well as what you plan on using those perennial forages for, is integral when deciding what to seed. Set yourself up for success by taking a closer look at that forage mix you were thinking of seeding for hay or pasture and ask yourself if it’s right for you. Use all the resources available to help in your decision; contact forage seed companies, look up species information on-line, think back to what worked or didn’t work on your farm over the years, and make an informed decision when it comes to selecting which legumes and grasses to seed this year.”

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Agri-News Briefs

Crop Pest and Pasture Management Workshop
Jim Broatch and Grant Lastiwka from Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development will be at the Breton Community Center on April 14, 2010 to talk about pests, which ones to watch out for and how to manage pastures during dry summers. For more information or to pre-register for this free workshop, call Brazeau County Agricultural Department at 780-542-7777.

Rural Living Open House
New rural residents may need to know about some agricultural operations and the rural way of life in order to ensure a smooth transition to their new environment. On April 20, 2010, Leduc County will present an overview of services provided and give new residents an opportunity to ask questions, pick up applications and meet new neighbours. Some of the topics that will be discussed include:

- Agricultural services — weed identification and control, equipment and trap rentals, no spray agreements, sustainable agriculture — over grazing, pest control, shelterbelt, mowing and roadside spraying programs
- Public works — dust control program, snowplowing, transfer stations, toxic round-up
- Enforcement — off highway vehicles, watercraft safety on lakes, animal control
- Fire services — station locations, volunteer recruitment, burning permits
- Parks & Recreation — park facilities, summer programs

Leduc County departments, the Land Stewardship Centre of Canada, Fish and Wildlife, Agri-Environment Services Branch (AESB, formerly PFRA) and other organizations will also be in attendance. To pre-register call 780-955-3555 ext. 3287 or e-mail Erin Belair at erinb@leduc-county.com or Heather Dickau at heatherm@leduc-county.com

Verified Beef Production
Verified Beef Production ™ is Canada’s on-farm food safety program for beef producers. Verified Beef Production (VBP):

- promotes good production practices on the farm that verify food safety and beef quality
- has a strong focus on practical approaches to ensure on-farm food safety
- provides on-going assurance that Canadian beef is produced to the highest safety standards, enhancing consumer confidence in the wholesomeness of beef

A local VBP workshop for cattle producers is being held in Rycroft on April 21, 2010. Two hours of the workshop will be dedicated to VBP and the balance will include review of the Line Fence Act and Stray Animals Act. Participation in this VBP workshop qualifies producers for cattle handling equipment funding up to $5000 through Growing Forward. Seating is limited for this free workshop, so registration is recommended. To pre-register, contact MD Spirit River at 780-864-3500.