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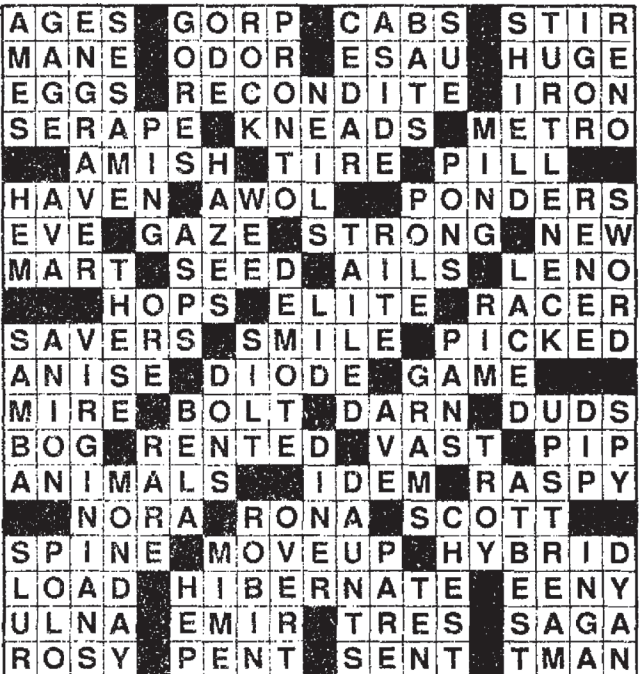
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## Field Notes

By: Ernie Flint, Ph.D., CCA, Regional Specialist - Agronomy  
Mississippi State University Extension Service

## No-till has a secret weapon

Through the years as I have written these weekly articles I have touched on the idea that when soil is allowed to remain undisturbed for some length of time Nature has a way of returning it to the state which was intended. A lot of great scientists have worked on this phenomenon, looking at it from many different angles much as we might gaze into the facets of a diamond and see different things in each one.

The consensus is in that reduced tillage can and will work if the farmer wants it to and when the correct techniques are applied in the supplementation of nutrients, drainage, and crop rotation. There is still some argument over this fact since the temptation to use tillage is so deeply entrenched in the minds of farmers.

The belief that tillage somehow predisposes the crop to better performance from seeding through harvest has

been passed down through generations of farmers and today persists even though we have long ago recognized that tillage is rapidly depleting the soil we depend upon for our lives. It seems that most people forget this fact each year as vast acreages of land are again reworked for crops which in many cases are not correctly fertilized or rotated with alternative crops.

One part of the story supporting the application of reduced tillage systems has rarely been discussed, at least in the forum of applied crop production. This is the subject of the unseen world of the root zone or "rhizosphere" upon which plants depend for almost all of their mineral supplies and water.

Most people look at a plant as an organism composed of two parts, the above ground portion with stems and leaves that produce the tissues and fruit that are harvested for our use. The other part of the plant in the eyes of most people is the root system which is expected to access all of the below ground assets needed by the plant.

Most of the research into plant physiology has dealt with the above ground part of the plant, and we have a great understanding of most of the miracle that converts solar energy into food and fiber for our use. However, we still lack a good understanding of the systems that reach far beyond the plant's own root system to aid the plant in finding many of the components it needs.

The "Secret Weapon" I have referred to is the mycorrhizal network that is present in almost all soils. In undisturbed soils these beneficial mycorrhizal fungi have the opportunity over periods of years to build an extensive network of interlocking hyphae sometimes called the "Hartig Network" after the scientist who first recognized it. This network can draw nutrients and water from distances and depths well out of reach of the plant's own roots.

This system is the reason plants growing in undisturbed soils can better tolerate stresses and deal with marginal nutrient supplies in many cases. It is the natural system that allows wild plants to grow in very inhospitable places. In short, it is Nature's backup system for helping plants grow and produce even though the soil environment may not be ideal.

Tillage of course has its place in preparing the land for crop production, but allowances should be made for the mycorrhizal system to develop and do the tasks for which it was intended. It is a part of creation that we seldom recognize but one which is essential to our survival. We need to work with it rather than against it.

Thanks for your time.

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