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AUCTIONS & GARAGE SALES ARE ON PAGES 18, 19, & 20

SOIL HEALTH

Eleanor Schumacher

Cover Crops are Coming Up in Madison County – Cover Crop Field Day, March 22nd

The first sign of spring is here! Lush, green fields are popping up all over the countryside. These emerald green displays are cover crops, working as hard above the ground as below. Wheat, rye and clover are just a few popular examples of cover crops growing now in Madison County farm ground. These and other cover crops will be showcased in action at this month's Cover Crop Field Day, on March 22nd. Part Two of the two-part series, Madison County Soil and Water Conservation District will host this conservation farming event, which begins at the Hamel Community Center, busses all attendees to the Hunsche Farm in Highland, and returns to Hamel for lunch, catered by Weezy's.






More and more farmers in Madison County are including cover crops in their rotations. Ted Krauskopf, Treasurer of the Madison County SWCD, takes every opportunity to learn more about best practices in farming with cover crops. "I believe the bushel-per-acre of cereal rye I drilled following soybeans greatly reduced erosion on my rolling crop land. It also helped eliminate some resistant marestail that was becoming a problem in those fields," said Krauskopf, who acknowledges that "timing is everything" when it comes to cover crops. "I was able to terminate the rye in the spring at about 4" to 6" tall, and planted corn with no problems."

There are many cover crop species that can be introduced into grazing systems as well. Krauskopf keeps a variety of cover crops to provide a good diet to his herd while keeping a healthy root system underground. "I use a multi-species blend of cover crop seed in my annual pasture that provides good grazing in the fall, and again the following spring since some of the varieties overwinter."

Cover crops have a much greater impact on soil than just surface effects. A dense matrix of roots awakes the productivity of soil. One tablespoon of soil is a universe of living activity, capable of holding at least one billion organisms. The heavy lifters are beneficial bacteria, which perform a process called nitrogen fixation, which makes nutrients available to plants. Related to bacteria are actinomycetes, or chains of cells that work to break down tough debris into smaller, more root-friendly particles. Their work creates the "fresh earth" smell you encounter when you dig in the dirt. Healthy soil also contains tiny threads of beneficial fungi called mycorrhizae, which attach to roots to help a plant reach more deeply into the soil to take up water and nutrients. This spoonful of soil also has animals, which might be microscopic, such as protozoa, or nematodes, or in comparison, something gargantuan, like an earthworm or millipede. The more soil beneficial "bugs" in your spoonful of soil, the better the environment for growing crops, and the more likely soil will stay put, rather than float away in a heavy downpour.

"We have to keep the soil on the field," says Gerry Rottman, Agronomist for Dorsey Farms in Moro. "We're more concerned with keeping a crop growing beyond the typical season. Wheat is an obvious choice that you'll see growing in so many fields now. Wheat is a cash cover crop." The early cover crop green-up also has above-ground benefits in terms of air quality. Through extensive soil sampling, researchers are investigating the degree that cover crops clean carbon from the air. In Madison County, seven farmers are participating in a study that will analyze the soil health benefits of cover crops. Soil sampling to measure carbon-related activity of cover crops are underway in these fields, and more Madison County farms may be eligible to join in the incentive. "There are a lot of incentives out there for planting cover crops," says Steve Brendel, Madison County Storm Water Coordinator, and member of Madison County's Cover Crop Field Day's planning committee. "It's worth it for farmers to look for a program or incentive for planting cover crops. Municipalities in Madison County also benefit from cover crops, especially considering water quality. The City of Highland is a good example of a municipality directly benefitted by conservation farming practices. All of the conservation happening in the Highland Silver Lake Watershed has potential to improve the quality of our drinking water, and recreational value of the lake." Highland Silver Lake is the drinking water source for Highland, St. Jacob, Grantfork, and Pierron. The City of Highland has been actively encouraging agricultural conservation, and took part in the planning and support of the Cover Crop Field Day. "With this current initiative, teaming up with the Hunsches, who live and farm the Silver Lake Watershed, we've found a great first-step toward a potential win-win situation for the landowners, City of Highland, and most importantly, our water customers," said Mark Rosen, Director of Parks & Recreation for City of Highland. "Any time we can work with our neighbors to improve water quality and in turn help with their farming practices, it's a good thing." The Cover Crop Field Day will be held Thursday, March 22nd, beginning with registration at 8:30 am at the Hamel Community Center, 10 Park Avenue, in Hamel. After a presentation by Randy McElroy, Southern Illinois' Technology Development Rep for Monsanto, event attendees will ride busses to visit the forty-plus acres of cover crop-planted fields at the Hunsche Farm. Jerry Berning of Berning Soil Evaluations will present a Cover Crop Root System Demonstration, followed by a Rainfall Simulator Demonstration by John Pike, Cover Crop Specialist with the Illinois Corn Growers Association. Attendees will return to Hamel by bus for a complimentary lunch served by Weezy's. The Madison County SWCD Cover Crop Field Day is free, and open to the public. Registration for the event will be taken until March 20. Contact the Madison County SWCD at (618) 656-7300 ext. 3 to register.



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MARCH 25 PALM SUNDAY CONFIRMATION 8:15 & 10:45 am 

April 1 ~ Easter Celebration 6:30 am
HAMA Sunrise Worship 8:15 & 10:45 am (BREAKFAST 9:30 AM)
April 6 - Trivia At HMS 7pm For KIA/KIC Latchkey Program
April 13 - Spaghetti Dinner/Auction 6 pm (Mission Trip)
April 14 - Millikin Women 7pm College Choir Concert