
Small Grains News - Farmer perspective on marketing small grains + Midwest Covers and Grains Conference registration

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Equipping farmers to build resilient farms and communities.



Farmer perspectives: Ben Penner's experience with diverse small grains in Minnesota

Ben Penner is a farmer and entrepreneur based in south central Minnesota. He grows organic wheat, Kernza and winter camelina as part of Ben Penner Farms. Beyond his own farm operations, Ben focuses on developing markets for small

grain and continuous living cover crops through his consulting business Aestiv LLC and as a board member for Perennial Promise Growers Cooperative.

Continuous growth: Ben started farming in Minnesota about 15 years ago with 32 acres which he transitioned to organic by 2010. In the ensuing years, he began growing heritage Turkey Red winter wheat and hard red spring wheat which he started selling to the St. Peter Food Co-op in 2016 as flour milled at Natural Way Mills in Middle River, Minnesota. To encourage ecosystem health, Ben gradually incorporated no-till and cover cropping whenever possible and began growing Kernza, a perennial wheatgrass, in 2019.

Establishing markets: Today, Ben's agricultural pursuits have expanded to more than 300 acres across four counties that he custom farms or custom markets. He has found success selling his products at various local stores, bakeries and breweries. **"It takes key individuals to champion and believe in your product – usually a grocery store buyer," Ben says.** "Just a couple people can really help you grow your sales. But you also have to be willing to face rejection sometimes."

PROGRAM UPDATES

Grow your business with the Cover Crop Business Accelerator



Are you ready to grow your cover crop business in 2025?

PFI's Cover Crop Business Accelerator program, in partnership with the Iowa Soybean Association, is here to help support your growth.

When you sign up, you'll receive business growth consulting, technical support, capital investment funds and incentive payments for custom seeding and seed production.

Apply by Feb. 14.

Blog: "Small Grains News: 2024 Year in Review"



In 2024, we spoke with farmers from four different Midwest states about a variety of topics and practices.

Revisit these featured farmers we heard from in 2024 as we look forward to another year of learning about extended rotations from farmers across the Midwest.

If you want to share your story in 2025, please contact **solveig.orngard@practicalfarmers.org**.

IN THE FIELD

Video: "Marketing Food-Grade Oats"



Market access can be one of the more difficult considerations with a third crop.

In this "Practical Cover Croppers" video, **Ben and Kristi Dwire** of Arco, Minnesota, discuss how they direct market food-grade oats and also share the importance of having a back-up plan for situations when the crop doesn't make food-grade specifications.

Watch the video.

Research report: "Oat Variety Trial 2024"



As the season for growing oats approaches, take a moment to view results from PFI's 2024 oat variety trials evaluating 16 varieties across four Iowa State University research sites in Iowa.

Learn what Iowa State University Extension researchers found to be the highest yielding varieties and which varieties most consistently reached a high food-grade test weight.

[Explore the trial data.](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- PFI research report: ["Oat Variety Trial 2023"](#)
- PFI blog post: ["Improving Resilience and Profitability Through Oat Breeding"](#)
- PFI resource: [Crop Rotation Analyzer Tool](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

Winter webinar: "How Do Small Grains Grow and Develop? Harnessing This Knowledge To Improve Management"



Tuesday, Feb. 4 | Noon-1 p.m. | [Online](#)

Thinking about adding small grains to your rotations? Have you recently started growing small grains but would like to know more?

Hear about small grain agronomics from **Margaret Smith**, Iowa farmer and forage agronomist with Albert Lea Seed. Learn about small grains physiology, growth and development, and learn how to identify growth stages that are key for management interventions. [Register today.](#)

February shared learning call: “Equipment for Planting Small Grains and Frost-Seeding”



Friday, Feb. 7 | Noon-1 p.m. | [Online](#)

Estling Farms Inc., located in Roosevelt, Minnesota, grows a wide variety of crops, harvesting six to 11 species each year. These species include hard red spring wheat, hybrid rye, conventional rye, malt barley, winter camelina, Kernza, spring wheat and more.

For our February shared learning call, **Jade Estling** will talk about the different equipment used in the production of small grains and will cover why and how he frost-seeds red clover. [Register to attend.](#)

2025 Midwest Covers and Grains Conference



Wednesday, March 5 | 8 a.m.-4 p.m.

Mark your calendars for the third annual [Midwest Covers and Grains Conference](#) at Great Wolf Lodge in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Secure your hotel room at just \$99 by Feb. 11 before rates increase.

This one-day event will explore topics on everything from interseeding covers into corn to finding viable market options for small grains.

[View the speaker line-up and register today.](#)

Upcoming PFI events

All events listed in Central time.

Feb. 18: Winter Webinar – Soil Studies: Exploring Creative Residue Management and Soil Amendments in a Four-Crop Rotation

Noon-1 p.m. | [Online](#)

March 11: Winter Webinar – Optimal Nitrogen Fertilizer Rates for Corn

Noon-1 p.m. | [Online](#)

March 7: Small Grains Shared Learning Call – Topic coming soon

Noon-1 p.m. | [Online](#)

March 25: Winter Webinar – The Advantages of Cover Crops

Noon-1 p.m. | [Online](#)

Friends of PFI events

Feb. 8: Conference – Sustainable Farming Association Annual Conference

Hosted by: Sustainable Farming Association

8:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. | St. Joseph, MN

****Visit with PFI staff at this event****

Feb. 11: Conference – Eastern Nebraska Soil Health Conference

Hosted by: University of Nebraska Extension

8 a.m.-3:30 p.m. | West Point, NE

****Visit with PFI staff at this event****

Feb. 11: Virtual Conference – Small Grains and Forages Conference

Hosted by: Albert Lea Seed

9:30 a.m.-3 p.m. | [Online](#)

Feb. 13: Virtual Field Day – Can Precision Planting of Cereal Rye Mitigate Corn Seedling and Yield Drag?

Hosted by: Iowa Learning Farms

1-2 p.m. | [Online](#)

Feb. 20-22: Conference – Marbleseed Organic Farming Conference

Hosted by: Marbleseed

La Crosse, WI

****Visit with PFI staff at this event****

[View our events calendar](#)

[Contact our team](#)

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Chat with any of us by calling the PFI office at (515)232-5661.

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