Southern Region Winter Wheat Planting Tips

Winter wheat will soon be ready for planting—will you? As the WestBred® Technical Product Manager for the Southern region, I know growers like you are always looking for new techniques to maximize yield and profit potential. I also know that as a grower, you may not have the time to research the newest trends, so I've gathered the most important tips I've learned speaking to growers throughout Texas and Oklahoma. Here are my top five key considerations to keep in mind when planting winter wheat this season.

1. Select genetics that match your management style.

Let the way you manage your crops guide your purchasing decisions. Doing this will allow you to find varieties with traits that are a good match for your field.

For instance, if you are not planning to spray for disease throughout the season, you should select varieties with excellent disease resistance packages for your area. However, if you plan on spraying for diseases and insects, you are able to select from a wider range of varieties with even more genetic potential.

Furthermore, if you know you have fertile soil and are planning for high yields, you'll need to find a variety with strong straw so it will stand in your field.

Before selecting the genetic traits, you also need to consider your water availability and find a variety that will adapt.

2. Prep your field and your seed.

Starter fertilizer and seed treatments are important to get off to a strong start. Seed-placed fertilizer is both cost-effective and gives a grower higher yield potential. The type or make up of the fertilizer is not as important as having the right nutrients.

One non-negotiable nutrient for wheat growers is nitrogen. Growers must be cautious about the amount of nitrogen applied in furrow with the seed. Wheat, since it is planted on narrow rows, can tolerate more than many grass crops. If soils are moist, six to eight pounds of nitrogen in furrow with the seed is tolerable. When it is really dry, I recommend lower quantities in furrow.

When applying potassium with nitrogen, be careful not to exceed five pounds combined in furrow (or about 20 pounds per acre).

Two other nutrients wheat growers can benefit from are zinc and sulfur. One pound of zinc in most scenarios is sufficient, while three to five pounds of sulfur per acre is plenty unless acres are sandy.

As always, before determining your fertilizer plan, test your soil for nutrients that are already available.
Seed treatments containing fungicides and insecticides ensure the genetic potential of your seed is protected at the start of crop development. Plants struggling from the start will have a difficult time reaching their highest yield potential.

3. Choose your planting date wisely.

The date you choose to plant winter wheat can make or break the season. Choosing a date depends on your location and regional weather patterns. I always say winter wheat should be planted after the temperatures begin trending lower. Planting in hot temperatures is tough on wheat for grain production and should be avoided due to lower grain yield potential.

In the Southern region, depending on where your farm is located, you may have a different planting date range. A good rule of thumb for growers is to plant around October 15 if you live north of Interstate 40. From I-40 to I-20, the best planting dates are between October 20 and November 1. Growers south of I-20 should begin planting around November 10 but no later than November 15.

Planting too early may result in excessive fall growth, which depletes the soil of moisture and nutrients. It can also increase the risk of diseases. Planting too late leaves the crop susceptible to winter injury.

4. Discover your Optimal Seeding Rate.

WestBred seed suppliers can provide their growers with an Optimal Seeding Rate recommendation that takes seed count into consideration, as well as location, planting date, production practices and target seeds per acre by variety.

Seeding rates based on seeds per acre have been used by some growers for years, but many growers haven’t taken advantage of this practice. Without the proper seeding rate your goal may be much harder to achieve.

While many wheat growers have traditionally planted based on pounds per acre, more studies now show that planting based on a seed count per acre can improve yield and profit potential.

Growers need to understand what they are planting and why. Just because a technique has been used in the past doesn’t mean you can assume it’s the best or the most effective.

5. Determine the correct planting depth.

Growers in the Southern Plains face a big challenge in finding adequate moisture levels for winter wheat seeding because of high temperatures, wind and lack of timely rainfall.

To remedy this, I suggest planting slightly deeper to allow the wheat crown to develop a little deeper in the soil.
Because temperatures in the Southern Plains remain elevated well into the fall, planting deeper allows the crown to establish in slightly cooler and hopefully moister soil. While planting one to one-and-a-half inches deep will suffice, I suggest planting one-and-a-half to two inches deep to mitigate some of the temperature and moisture conditions we may face.