

Southwest Region Winter Wheat Planting Tips

Wheat will soon be ready for planting, will you? As the WestBred[®] Regional Commercial Manager for the Southwest 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 California. Here are my top five key considerations to keep in mind when planting wheat this season.

1. Select genetics that match your needs.

Let your specific, regional needs 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. Growers in California benefit from varieties that have strong Yellow (Stripe) Rust and Septoria Leaf Blotch resistance.

For forage varieties, growers should look for high tonnage yield potential. However, it's important to keep in mind that a high yielding grain variety might also serve as a good forage line because in some cases, grain yield can be correlated to forage yield.

2. Prep your field.

Starter fertilizer is important to get off to a strong start. Any type of fertilizer application should be preceded by a soil sample which identifies the current nutrient level of the field. As a rule of thumb, you should subtract the amount of nutrients that will be removed if there is a crop growing in the field when you sample.

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.

To minimize nitrogen loss, split applications of nutrients. Using a starter fertilizer followed by another application of nitrogen is another management option. If feasible, tissue analysis can help identify a snap shot of nutrient uptake and the nutrient level can be adjusted accordingly.

A field with a large amount of residue on top of the soil may require deep plowing or deep tillage. Increases in soil organic matter typically increase soil cation exchange capacity (CEC). Soils with higher organic matter have higher water-holding capacity so growers should consider reducing tillage. Growers should ensure the seedbed is several inches deep and clod size is kept to a minimum, especially for drills with narrow spacing.



3. Choose your planting date wisely.

The date you choose to plant your wheat can make or break the season. Choosing a date depends on your location and regional weather patterns. I always say 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 Southwest region, depending on where your farm is located, you may have a different planting date range. Growers in the Sacramento Valley should plant in mid-November, while growers in the San Joaquin Valley should plant from late November to early December.

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.

Optimal Seeding Rates will maximize yield potential, land use and potentially offer a better return on investment. When planting, relying solely on pounds per acre for your seeding rate can lead to variable outcomes because differences in seed size and density can influence the number of seeds in each pound. At planting, underseeding can lead to wasted land, increased weed pressure, delays in maturity and over reliance on the variety's ability to tiller. Overseeding means wasted seed, increased plant competition, high lodging and increased disease risk. Both overseeding and underseeding can undermine overall yield results and reduce profits.

5. Determine the correct planting depth.

The proper planting depth is necessary for good emergence and stand establishment later in the season. For wheat growers in the Southwest region, I recommend planting at a 1 to 1.5-inch depth. This should be followed closely when planting wheat under irrigated conditions.

Because temperatures in the Southwest remain elevated well into the fall, planting deeper allows the crown to establish in slightly cooler and hopefully moister soil. Planting 1.5 inches deep can mitigate some of the temperature and moisture conditions we may face.

