by Margaret Hryniuk

Lentils: A Key to Grower Success

IN BRIEF

The Farleys provide tips for success in growing red lentils.

PHOTO: LANE'S A/V

Bill and James Farley agree on the importance of crop rotation and an accurate field history, particularly for red lentil.

Bill Farley took over the family farm in 1958. It comprised 640 acres of wheat, flax and barley. Today, he and his partners – wife Lil and son James – have 2,900 acres, with 900 acres in lentil, mostly Blaze red.

Located west of Regina, the Farleys first grew red lentils in 1992, seeding 80 acres of Red Crimson, a new variety at the time.

"We were amazed at the yield," says Bill. "A big storm came through that year and, despite 40 per cent hail damage, we still got 25 bushels to the acre. So we were very pleased, and have grown more acres ever since."

Although they'd been lentil producers since 1978, the Farleys still had lots to learn. For example, they'd been growing Laird and Richlea green lentils, but switched to Richlea only, primarily because it withstands weathering better and is of medium size.

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As long-time lentil producers, they already knew the financial importance of timing. The Indian sub-continent is a big market, says Bill, so there's a strong demand for high-quality lentils before Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim year, during which dietary restrictions, including abstinence from meat, are observed. So the lentil samples have to get to the buyer or processor as soon they're harvested: "The earlier you seed and the quicker you get them off, the better the market."

Bill suggests two additional tips for selling red lentils. First, buyers and processors require samples before making any purchase: "Most will not buy without seeing a sample," he says. "It's all visual quality."

The second tip is market awareness.

"Most good growers keep a close eye on the market. They talk to processors, government people in agriculture and international

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trade, and the Canadian Wheat Board, which has one of the best weather surveillance systems in the world. Lots of companies, such as CGF Brokerage, Wild Oats, Stat Publishing, Weber Commodities, Simpson Seeds and Walkers put out newsletters, so producers should get on a mailing list. *PulsePoint* is also a source of market information," says Bill.

James advises potential red lentil growers to contact processors and buyers before they buy seed, in fact: "They should find out the market prospects and maybe even get a production contract."

But, although Bill says brokerage firms can find a market for crops "not up to snuff," market information is worth little if a poor-quality crop is offered. To achieve a premium price for red lentils, attention must be paid to every aspect of the production cycle, beginning before the seed goes in the ground. For exam-

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ple, says James, red lentils should not be grown on fields with a history of high weed populations: "Lentils are not competitive with weeds. A weedy crop can cut production in half."

The land on which red lentils are grown should drain well: "Lentils don't like too much water. Lying in water for two or three days will kill it," says Bill.

Both James and Bill emphasize the importance of crop rotation: "Don't put red lentils on land that grew green lentils for at least three or four years. As pedigree seed growers, we need a field history of land use, but everyone growing red lentils should have this," says James.

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Other tips include the use of clean seed certified or tested for high germination and low disease. The entire field should be inoculated with an approved inoculant to aid in fixation of nitrogen, and the fields should be smoothed with a roller for ease of harvest. During the growing season, red lentil fields should be checked for disease or pests more often than cereals or flax; this could be twice a week, depending on the year.

Harvest is critical too. Because it's important to prevent seed damage, for example, the combine should be set at a lower speed than for cereals. And, says James, if the crop can be taken off with a slightly higher moisture level – above 14 per cent – there will be less cracking and splitting.

Achieving the optimum moisture level is tricky, however: "We may take off pulses that are tough, but we utilize aeration," says Bill, to which James adds, "Processors like to buy a product that is 14 per cent (moisture) or less, so you don't want to take them off too tough."

Storage is of utmost importance, with clean, tight, good-quality bins being key, says James. The Farleys use steel hopper bins that allow no entry of moisture or rodents and, because a belt conveyer is used to transfer the crop to the truck, reduce the mechanical damage resulting from augering.

"A higher priced, quality crop needs high-quality storage. This crop is worth the money needed for good bins," says James.

And money is what this crop is all about. As Bill says, "If I hadn't grown lentils, canola and flax, I wouldn't be farming today."

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