

Oats seed grower on a winning roll

By CARL HAHN
LIFE staff

SUNDRE — You can't blame Bob Mastin if he's feeling his oats these days.

The Sundre-area seed producer, who has grown into the largest oat seed retailer in the province, has been named the best pedigreed oat seed grower at the Calgary Seed Fair and Hay Show for the third year in a row.

Mastin readily admits there wasn't much competition the first couple years he won — there weren't any entries at all the year prior. The show organizers made a special effort to ensure more oats growers entered this year, but Mastin still became the first person ever to win it three years in a row.

"I ended up winning both divisions again, which meant more to me, I guess, because now there are entries from all over the province."

He obviously could have won four years in a row, since there were no entries prior to his first win, but it may have been just as well he missed the entry deadline that year.

It was the second of two of the best crops he had in years, so he figured

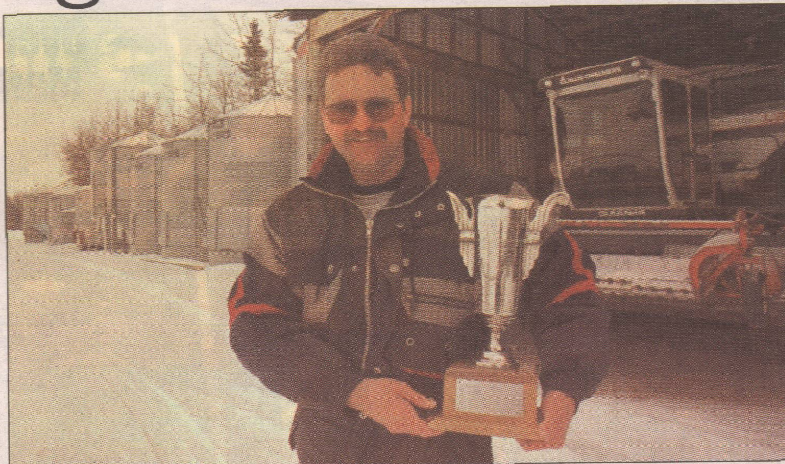


Photo by CARL HAHN/LIFE staff

Bob Mastin with the Calgary Seed Fair trophy he's won three straight years for having the best pedigreed seed oats

he'd better enter a show somewhere. When he learned the Calgary fair's deadline had been moved up and he had already missed it, he entered the samples in larger seed shows instead.

"They were bigger ones and it went further afield. It ended up that year

they were the second-best seed oats in North America."

But he decided winning local shows might have more impact on his sales, so he tried Calgary again the next year and won it. His victory the following year came as a bit of a surprise, since

some bad fall weather hurt his entry sample.

"I guess other people had had the same problems, and I won it."

He ended up winning both the pedigreed division and the open oats class with a sample of common seed as well.

This year he was up against about seven other pedigreed entries and twice as many common seed entries, and still won both categories. In fact, his common oats were named the grand champion open seed sample, something that is almost automatically given to the top wheat entry each year.

Being the only person to hold the pedigreed trophy this century is a plateau of success he's climbed toward for more than 20 years. Mastin says while attending Olds College in the late 1970s he was encouraged to look for ways to diversify on his parents' farm.

The common suggestion was to pour hundreds of thousands of dollars into a livestock facility, but he realized the one advantage the family farm had was clean land. It had been used for nothing but pasture or hay since his dad bought it in 1945.

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"That keeps a lot of the weeds — that are a problem when you're growing seed — out of the rotation," he explains.

Mastin grew his first seed crop in 1978, but ended up working for a farm equipment company for six years while his dad and brother Cary kept the seed business going.

Cary bought the farm in 1984 and the brothers farmed together, then Mastin bought out his brother in 1996 and it became a solo act.

Things went bad that year, though. People were losing crops across the province.

But instead of killing Mastin's business it made it stronger.

Because so many people lost their oats crops it drove large companies like UGG and Agrico almost completely out of the oat seed business, he says, while it forced him to start finding other sources of seed to service his own customers.

"It would have been the spring of '97 I became the largest retailer of oats in the province of Alberta."

"And I've increased that a little bit every year."

It wasn't the only time perseverance paid off. Mastin points out that he decided in 1996 to hang on to the old Athabasca variety, even though everybody else was letting it go.

"Most varieties last three or four years now, and they've got something new and improved," he says.

"That's one variety that I can grow well here, because it's a very early maturing variety, and it has a decent kernel and decent yield."

But it turned out a hay processing plant wanted a pedigreed oat for export to Japan as green feed.

The Japanese wanted the sweetest oat hay on the market, and that happened to be Athabasca.

"And by that point I was the only guy in the province still growing Athabasca," he laughs.

"I couldn't have scripted this any better."

"That very first oat I started with in 1978 is Athabasca, and that's the variety that I won these seed shows with the last three years."

Athabasca is far from the only variety he grows, however.

He keeps about seven or eight available, so there's an oat to match any customer's needs.

He has other growers working under contract with different varieties, and buys from other growers to make sure he always has something for his customers.

He's finding the last-minute demand for green feed seed is spilling well into July now.

Instead of trying to expand his growing operation, he turned to sourcing, calling on the people he'd bought seed from during the hard years to fill the growing demand.

He doesn't have to live with the risk of losing a crop or failing certification, and still gets the profit of the markup.

What was once a way of diversifying the farm has now taken over completely.

He slowly sold off the last of his cattle, because selling 100,000 bushels of seed a year (and growing about 40 per cent of it) is about all one man can handle.

From 1996 to 1998 he broke a bone each year during the spring rush. It was like he was giving himself a sign.

"That's when I decided, 'I've got to start cutting back or I'll kill myself,'" he laughs.

"When I'm here by myself, you have to specialize or you're probably going to end up six feet under."