

Seed grower hand picks a winner

BY TAMARA COLLINS
MVP Staff

Bob Mastin has found a winning oat seed in king-sized kernels.

The Sundre man took top honours in the oat competition and reserve champion in the oat-canary-seed championship class at the prestigious Seager Wheeler

Pedigree Seed Show.

The event was held in conjunction with the 2006 Western Canadian Crop Production Show in Saskatoon.

Mastin won with his Waldern oat exhibit, which included king-size kernels that are 20 per cent larger than standard oats.

Mastin's secret to success

is all in his special technique, he said.

For the past four years Mastin has been hand selecting the largest kernels for his seed plots on the premise that bigger seed will produce bigger plants.

Mastin, who owns Mastin Seeds just outside Sundre, chose to use the Waldern kernel for many reasons,

besides its larger size.

For years, Mastin used Foothill, a forage oat which his customers prefer for greenfeed, silage and swath grazing.

Foothill was a variety with excellent drought tolerance, good nutritional value and palatability.

Mastin, who needs to combine the oat, believes this variety has everything against it. It has poor lodging resistance, a long maturity, thin kernels and low yield.

Mastin decided to search for a forage cereal and a little known variety with large kernels supported by a big, strong plant.

That is when he discovered the Waldern oat.

The Waldern, bred at the AAFC Lacombe Research Farm, was registered in 1990.

It is designated in the Alberta Crop Variety Descriptions as a feed oat with high yield, large, plump kernels, and good lodging and shattering resistance.

It has a high hull content, 22 per cent to 27 per cent, which makes it excellent feed for ruminants, but matures fairly late and has a low test weight.

According to Mastin, Waldern likes black soil with good fertility and does well in cool, moist conditions.

"It does have a thick hull, so I find that I'm losing some bushel weight

because it doesn't pack in tight. But in a forage oat, I'm looking for top-quality forage, not top grain traits," said Mastin. "Waldern is a dual-purpose oat. Producers can combine it for feed, it's good for greenfeed and swath grazing and not a bad silage oat."

Mastin went on to say that the Waldern has a big, soft stem, making it equal to AC Mustang.

It is phenomenal for standing with that kind of growth, but if it's too mature, the stem is like a willow, he said.

Cut at early heading, it will be fine for greenfeed or swath grazing, but he said it loses its palatability as it matures.

Mastin says that his best customers are beef producers, who also prove to be top notch seed growers.

Every year he looks to livestock producers for some of the 3,000 acres of seed production he contacts out.

Mastin believes his success is due to his attention to detail, and cleanliness.

"The biggest downfall is contamination," said Mastin. "I keep everything clean as if it were an operating room."

The Seager Wheeler award holds special significance for Mastin.

He uses the very same hand selection process to improve the quality of forage oats he grows, that

enabled Seager Wheeler to develop cereal varieties that were better adapted to the dryland-farming methods of the Canadian prairies 100 years ago.

It was in 1978 when Mastin first became interested in growing seed.

He was attending Olds College, and his instructors were trying to push intensive livestock operations.

"I looked at our assets, we had clean land, and we could grow oats well," said Mastin. "I pencilled out a model and realized I had a very viable business model. And I could get a great return on an investment."

Mastin was not interested in borrowing hundreds of thousands of dollars to start a livestock operation.

It was more than 20 years ago that Mastin and his brother decided to become registered seed growers to maximize returns from their limited land base.

His brother has now relocated his farming operation northwest to expand the cattle business.

"I realized early on that I didn't need my own cleaning plant and a bunch of staff to be successful in this business," he said. "I needed to provide the best seed I could to as many customers as I can, and to spread my risk. It's also about manpower, investment in equipment, land and the time to market, plan and operate the business."

continued on page 9

PAGE 9

Seed grower

continued from page 8

The bulk of Mastin's seed grain land - nearly 4,500 acres - is now contracted out to be grown by other farmers, from Lethbridge to Peace River.

"No one drought or frost will keep me from having a supply of top quality seed," he said.

Another proud moment for Mastin was becoming the first person to ever win best pedigreed oats seed grower three years in a row at the Calgary Seed Fair and Hay Show. And then surpassing that and winning for a fourth time last year.

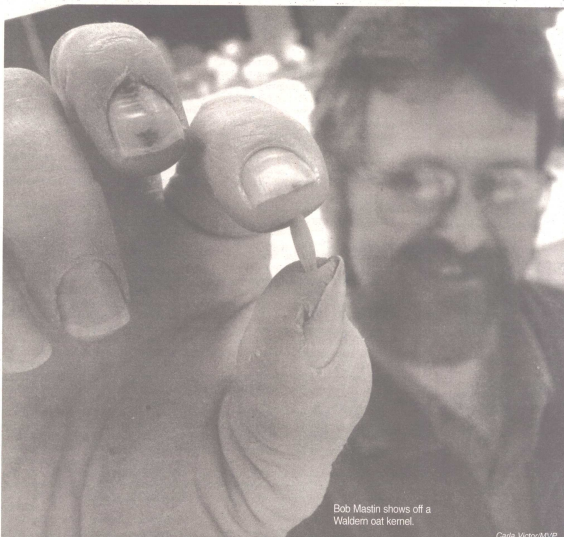
Only two years away from getting his 30-year certificate as a member of the Canadian Seed Growers, Mastin is proud of his success.

As far as the upcoming season, Mastin says this could be the year all alternative fuel and energy programs start impacting grains.

"This could be the water shed year that farmers start getting paid to burn grains as fuel," said Mastin. "Hopefully right now are the lowest grain prices we will see in our lifetime."

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SALUTE TO AGRICULTURE



Bob Mastin shows off a Waldern oat kernel.

Carla Victor/MVP

Continued on page 9

Although the text on this picture says "Bob Mastin shows off a Waldern oat kernel" it is in fact a tiny Foothill oat kernel he's holding. He says "my big Waldern would be almost double"