

Best pedigreed oats net trophy — again

Oats grower scores hat trick

By Carl Hahn
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SUNDRE, Alta. — Bob Mastin has become the first person to be named best pedigreed oats seed grower three years in a row at the Calgary Seed Fair and Hay Show.

The Sundre farmer has grown into Alberta's largest oats seed retailer, and admits there wasn't much competition the first couple years that he won.

Show organizers made a special effort to ensure more oats growers entered this year.

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

This year he was up against seven other pedigreed entries and twice as many common seed entries. His common oats were named the grand champion open seed sample, which is almost always awarded to the top wheat entry.

His oats success traces its roots back to the late 1970s at Olds College, where 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 only pasture or hay since his father bought it in 1945.

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

Began as partnership

Mastin grew his first seed crop in 1978, but ended up working for a farm equipment company for six years while his father and brother Cary kept the seed business going. Cary bought the farm in 1984 and the brothers farmed together. Mastin eventually bought out his brother in 1996.

Things went bad that year, as farmers lost crops across the province.

But instead of killing Mastin's business, it made it stronger. He said that because so many people lost their oats crops, large companies like UGG and Agricore were driven almost out of the oat seed business, forcing him



Bob Mastin says this year's award for best pedigreed seed oats means more than the first two because there was more competition in both the pedigreed and common seed entries. (Carl Hahn photo)

to find 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 said he decided in 1996 to hang on to the old Athabasca oats 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 said.

"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 pedigreed oats for export to Japan as greenfeed. The Japanese wanted the sweetest oats hay on the market, which happened to be Athabasca.

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

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

Mastin grows seven or eight different varieties so there's one to match any customers' needs.

He will also buy oats from other

growers when demand is high. That way, he doesn't have to live with the risk of losing a crop or failing certification, and still gets the profit of the mark-up.

What was once a way of diversifying the farm has now taken over completely. He slowly sold off his cattle because selling 100,000 bushels of seed a year — and growing about 40 percent of it — is about all one man can handle.

Between 1996 and 1998 he broke a bone each year during the spring rush.

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

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

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

—Bob Mastin,
oats grower

see next page

Perfect location, conditions for oats

■ Cool night breezes and weed-free land are keys to his success.

SUNDRE, Alta. — Oats are a crop many farmers don't take too seriously, but they've been a gold mine to seed grower Bob Mastin.

Oats make up about 60 percent of his seed sales, because it's the crop where he has a competitive advantage. His land has always been virtually weed-free.

"Ninety-nine percent of the land in the province is contaminated with wild oats," he said.

"If they ever invented a spray that would kill wild oats, I would have a lot of competition."

With most other crops, if the price of seed goes a little high, farmers can always pull a little feed grain out of the bin for seed. Not so with oats, he said, because crops of feed oats will be contaminated with wild oats.

Worth the effort

Because of that, oats seed prices don't tend to be influenced by feed prices the way other crops are. The improved margin makes all the fussiness put into growing a seed crop worthwhile.

Oats do well in his location. Cool breezes off the hills at night relieve the day's heat stress, so he's usually able to pull off quality crops.

His land and location allow him to easily get pedigreed certification.

Pedigreed seeds draw the business of farmers looking to export crops or byproducts, or wanting to harvest some of their own seed.

But the same conditions allow Mastin to produce fine common seed. He believes that's why his common oats were the grand champion feed seed at the Calgary Seed Fair and Hay Show this year.

"Most of my common seed is grown to the same standard as pedigreed."

— HAHN