

Waldern is a dual-purpose oat

BY DEBBIE FURBER

Waldern oats are 6' tall, bushy like a jungle and a brute to harvest, but Bob Mastin likes them that way. His Waldern oat exhibit took top honors in the oat competition and reserve champion in the oat-canary-seed championship class at the prestigious Seager Wheeler Pedigreed Seed Show held in conjunction with the 2006 Western Canadian Crop Production Show in Saskatoon.

The king-size Waldern kernels on display attracted a lot of attention. "Waldern kernels are 20% larger than standard oats and these are another 20% larger than your typical Waldern kernels," says Bob. This didn't happen by a stroke of good luck. For the past 4 years, he's been hand selecting the largest kernels for his seed plots on the premise that bigger seed will produce plants that are bigger and bushier yet.

Mastin Seeds is located in the foothills near Sundre, in central Alberta. It's cattle country and many of his customers like cereal forage varieties for greenfeed, silage and swath grazing. For years, the choice in forage oat was pretty much limited to Foothill, a variety with excellent drought tolerance, good nutritional value and palatability. However, in the eye of the seed grower who has to combine it, the variety has everything against it — poor lodging resistance, a long maturity, thin kernels and low yield.

Going against the grain favor-

"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," explains Bob. "It has a big, soft stem, making it equal to AC Mustang in lodging resistance. Mustang is phenomenal for standing with that kind of growth, but if it's too mature, the stem is like a willow. Cut at early heading, it will be fine for greenfeed or swath grazing, but it loses its palatability as it matures, so we can't always do what we want, when we want."

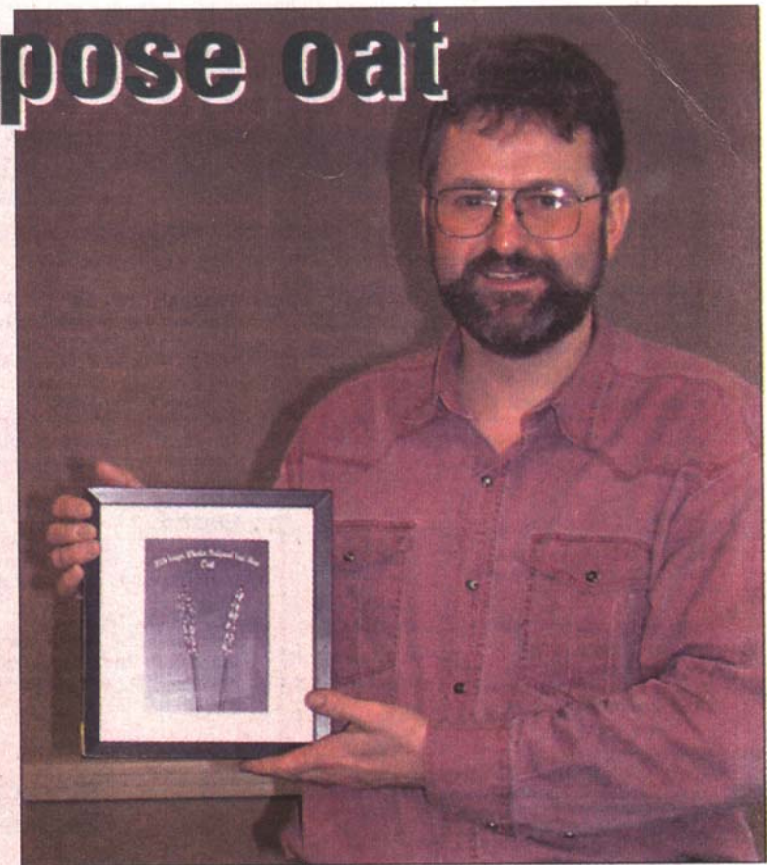
In addition to being good customers, beef producers have proven themselves to be top-notch seed growers as well. Bob looks to livestock producers for some of the 3,000 acres of seed production that he contracts out every year. This arrangement has a 75% success rate, whereas contracts with commercial grain producers seem to result in failure 70% of the time.

He attributes the success to a number of factors. Often, ranch-

ers have wild oat-free forage acres that they intend to break, so they welcome prospects for growing a higher value crop. They generally don't grow a wide range of crops, so contamination with commercial grains is not usually an issue. Most beef producers, and especially those in the purebred business, tend to pay close attention to detail and are familiar with regulatory procedures.

Being recognized by the judges of the Seager Wheeler show is an honor in itself, but Bob says that the award holds special significance for him. He's using 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.

Debbie Furber farms near Tisdale, Sask.



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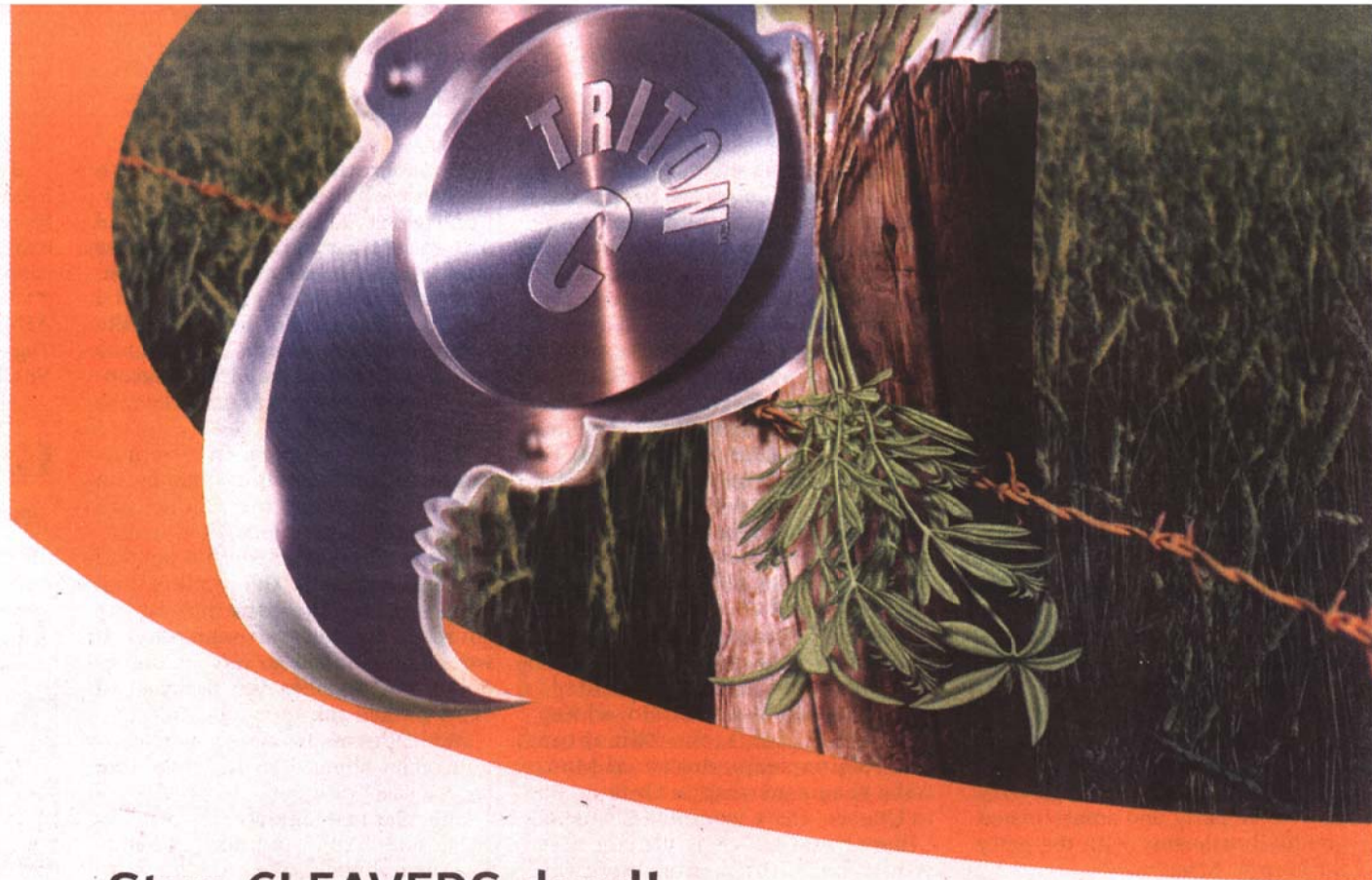
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ing semi-dwarf technology, Bob searched for a forage cereal and a little-known variety with large kernels supported by a big, strong plant. Waldern oats caught his eye. Waldern, bred at the AAFC Lacombe Research Farm, was registered in 1990 and is designated in the Alberta Crop Variety Descriptions as a feed oat with high yield, large, plump kernels, and good lodging and shattering resistance. Its high hull content, at 22% to 27%, makes it an excellent feed for ruminants, but matures fairly late and has a low test weight. In Bob's experience, 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," says Bob.

The Prairieland Park Corporation, which organizes the Seager Wheeler Pedigreed Seed Show, has a policy against releasing the names of the judges, so no information on Waldern's award-winning attributes is available. For Bob, though, what his customers like matters the most. His specialty is catering to beef producers and they're looking for forages that will extend the grazing season from early spring right through into the winter months. Blends of 3 or 4 varieties are common. Winter triticale and fall rye are good for late summer grazing when intercropped with cereals that will be cut earlier for greenfeed or silage.

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