

## Regional News

### **Alta. man hopes Sundre barley will change fortunes of Prairie farmers**

**By Cameron Kennedy - THE CANADIAN PRESS**

The Oat King has a new queen, and her name is Sundre.

Bob Mastin first laid eyes on the big, bushy six-row barley during a field tour in 2005.

From that moment on, the owner of Mastin Seeds coveted her bountiful kernels and silky smooth awns.

Three years later, Mastin had a handful of cereal farmers across central Alberta singing Sundre's praises, too.

That prompted him to organize a field tour to show off her charms to a wider audience.

Mastin is confident Sundre's fertility — coupled with his distribution plan — will enable her to dethrone Xena, the reigning queen of feed barley.

"I'm hoping that within three to four years Sundre will be the No. 1 feed variety in Alberta and Saskatchewan," says Mastin.

"It has the potential to do that. If I don't make that happen, I'll feel kind of bad that maybe I didn't do as good a job as I could have."

Located northeast of Sundre in the heart of cattle country, Mastin's farm proved to be the ideal place to grow oats and barley for forage. Wild-oat free, the land gave Mastin a natural advantage over his competition, earning him awards and the moniker "The Oat King."

But when mad cow disease uprooted demand for forage crops, the "King" sensed a need to diversify his operation. Around the same time, Mastin was introduced to BT 566 during a crop tour at the Lacombe Research Centre. Ironically, the variety wasn't even on the tour, Mastin says. It was growing in a field 100 metres over.

"The tour broke to look at it," he recalls with a laugh. "(The guide) was left standing there with a megaphone and no people."

Mastin begged his seed supplier to court the research centre for the distribution rights to BT 566. When it declined, he submitted the winning proposal himself.

Mastin named the barley after his hometown Sundre, about 75 kilometres southwest of Red Deer. His first choice, Master, a play on his last name, was taken already. So were Alberta and Sylvan.

“There have been seed growers get varieties before, but it has always been a consortium or a group — never just to a single seed grower. It was a matter of being at the right place at the right time.”

Mastin’s unique approach to distribution helped to sell his bid.

As a rule, 85 per cent of cereal grain seed sold is common, which leaves pedigreed seed growers to fight over 15 per cent, he explains.

That encourages pedigreed seed growers to maximize their royalties when they release a new variety.

In some cases, they’ve charged as much as \$1 per bushel more for their variety than commercial seed.

The result is, farmers buy very little of it — or just enough to grow it and resell the seed illegally.

“It’s kind of a vicious cycle,” says Mastin. “Most seed distribution companies kill the variety in the first year of release because they have a hot new product. They can charge that high price, and they do.”

Mastin set out to break the cycle by slashing royalties, making Sundre more affordable to farmers. While growers may earn less money in royalties, Sundre’s yield advantage should enable them to grow more bushels at a lower cost — and earn more money in the end.

“I kind of had that attitude that, ‘If I was king of the world, here is how I would do it.’”

Mastin also hopes keeping the price low will take away the economic incentive for farmers to do an end run around the Plant Breeders Rights.

Eventually, he wants the price of Sundre seed to be somewhere between that of commercial and pedigreed seed.

“Fifty years ago, every farmer probably kept a milk cow on the farm to produce their own milk. Nobody does that now. They just go to the store and buy their milk,” says Mastin.

“I’m hoping in a few years that a lot of farmers will say it’s to their economic advantage just to go buy their seed. If they can get good-quality seed at a good price and it’s readily available, why wouldn’t they?”

Mastin got his hands on 60 bushels of breeder seed — enough to fill up the box of a pickup truck — in 2006. He used it to seed three small fields at his farm and two near Peace River — added insurance against hail.

“I had it spread from the Peace River to here in five small fields, which was a pain in the butt, but it was a way to ensure that it didn’t get wiped out.”

Despite Mastin's precautions, all three central Alberta fields suffered hail damage. Two of them narrowly avoided being wiped out by massive hail storms.

Still, one field that had 15 to 20 per cent hail damage produced 160 bushels an acre. Mastin's previous best was 130 bushels per acre. The provincial average is around 50 bushels per acre.

"A picture from that field ... made it into the Canadian Wheat Board calendar. It was the centrefold for August this year."

This is the first year Sundre seed was available to farmers.

Mastin created the self-guided Sundre Barley Driving Tour after receiving a call from a local farmer complaining that his crop looked, "Too damn good!" The tour featured 20 commercial fields grown by area farmers under a variety of conditions.

The beauty of having 20 fields is that there is something different to see at almost every one, says Mastin.

"Some guys have got it on barley stubble, some guys have got it on wheat stubble, some on sod plowing, some on summer fallow, some on heavily manured land, some on continuous crop land that has been in grain for 20, 25 years in a row," he says.

"It gives you a good idea how it might respond over a broad spectrum of growing conditions."

Mastin admits it won't be easy to knock Xena off its perch because it's a "darn good" variety in its own right.

Sundre's advantages include its high yield and smooth awns — the long beards extending up from the kernels — which make it a good choice for silage, green feed and swath grazing.

A six-row barley that is ideal for forage usually struggles during drought because too much water evaporates from its large leaf area. However, Sundre has two genetic lines — one from India and the other from Ethiopia — to boost its drought tolerance, says Mastin.

"It's a really good dual-purpose barley," he says. "It was the highest-yielding grain variety out there and, if not the best, was one of the best forage varieties out there."

"It could be very competitive in two categories."

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