

Hazelnuts lure grass seed growers

Facing low prices, growers have planted 500 to 1,000 acres of hazelnut trees

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By JOHN SCHMITZ, Feb. 24, 2012

The U.S. housing slump is helping grow Oregon's hazelnut industry, as farmers replace some grass seed acreage with the state's signature nut crop. Feeble demand for grass seed from landscapers and the anemic fall over-seeding market in the southern U.S. have contributed to the trend, growers said.

Linn County grass seed grower Ryan Glaser, whose father, Dennis, planted 110 acres of Barcelona hazelnuts in the early 1980s, put in 80 acres of Jeffersons, a new kernel variety, late in 2011 on former grass seed ground.

Glaser, who farms about 3,000 acres of turf-type grass seed, said several grass seed-growing neighbors have planted hazelnuts within the last few years. "There are three or four new plantings right near us," he said. Glaser said that while he's not blessed with the best of soils for growing hazelnuts he still manages to beat the yield average in his area.

The Glasers recently hosted a hazelnut pruning demonstration that was attended by a several grass seed growers eyeing the crop. Crop Production Services agronomist Bob Spinney, of Tangent, estimated grass seed growers in his area have planted between 500 and 1,000 acres of hazelnuts in recent years. "Grass acres have been overdone over the last few years and we're taking some of those acres out and putting them into filberts and other crops," Spinney said.

He added that he knows of at least five grass seed growers in the Tangent area alone who have replaced some of their grass acres with hazelnuts. Hazelnuts are a better bet than blueberries, another profitable crop, in Linn County because "the rumor is blueberries have been overdone," and because "the ground (in his area) will support filberts a little better than blueberries," Spinney said.

Another factor contributing to the growing popularity of hazelnuts in his area, Spinney said, is the drop-off in eastern filbert blight strikes the last two years and the availability of highly EFB-resistant cultivars developed by Oregon State University. Most growers in his area are opting for Yamhill, as opposed to inshell varieties, Spinney said.

Linn County grass seed grower Telly Wirth, who planted his first hazelnuts in 2009 and is aiming for up to 140 acres, invested heavily in the crop for the higher returns compared to grass seed and the more stable nature of the crop.

When grass seed, wheat and clover grower Dennis Glaser announced that he was going to diversify further and give hazelnuts a try back in 1981, he was told by OSU Extension it would never work.

The reason: his heavy, poorly drained soils were not a good fit for hazelnuts. "I was told that (Willamette) river bottom ground was best because it's really well drained. But I figured if my ground could grow wheat, we could grow trees on it." Making the project even more complex was the diverse mix of soils on his Linn County property, from highly desirable Willamette to poorly drained Dayton-Amity.

Today, Glaser is realizing some of the best yields in Oregon, and is so pleased with his initial Barcelona plantings that he recently added 80 acres of the new OSU kernel variety Yamhill.

So how did Glaser prove the experts wrong?

First off, he tilled his original 125 acres of Barcelonas so that they would never suffer from "wet feet." He then has followed an intensive management program that includes aggressive pruning, leaving organic debris on the orchard floor to retain nutrients, and regular anti-fungal treatments to keep eastern filbert blight in check.

To facilitate pruning and EFB scouting, and to improve spraying efficiency, he also keeps his mature Barcelona trees about 20 feet shorter than those on good ground in other parts of the valley. He conducted his first picking when the trees were three years old and then recovered all his costs for the venture around the 10th year. "It's been a grand experience, and a grand experiment, too," he said.