

## With each season comes new lessons

By TOM J. BECHMAN

**S**TEVE Eilers planted his first cover crops in 2011. Eilers, Brook, seeded radishes, oats and crimson clover on

idle acres in August. He no-tilled into them the next spring.

“We saw some yellow corn early because we weren’t applying starter 2-by-2 yet,” he recalls. “But by August, moisture



**LEARNING PROCESS:** Dan Perkins (right) is helping Steve Eilers learn the ins and outs of making cover crops work in Eilers’ operation.

conservation was a big deal.”

Although all of Eilers’ crops fared better than most in Indiana in 2012, he saw a boost where he no-tilled into cover crops. “That field stayed green longer and yielded well,” he says.

Eilers seeded cover crops that fall for corn going to corn. He saw a good boost in yields the next year.

### Tough cover crop lessons

Then Eilers learned that not every fall is kind for seeding cover crops. The fall of 2013 was dry, and his cover crop stand was marginal. He figured at best, he broke even on benefits vs. costs.

Still, he seeded ryegrass last fall, and it came up well but was small. He’s waiting to see what happens this spring.

Eilers is learning many lessons others have learned before him: Seeding earlier gives better fall growth; cover crops need moisture to germinate; and nitrogen at planting into cover crops is crucial.

Eilers participates in a multiyear project organized by the Conservation Technology Information Center, funded through a USDA Conservation Innovation Grant. Dan Perkins, Jasper County Soil and Water Conservation District technician, says the idea is to gather information about cover crop growth, best methods of seeding and more.

Several agencies and groups, including Purdue University, are involved in collecting data. Eilers is considered someone with intermediate experience in cover crops. One goal of the project is to encourage farmers who haven’t tried cover crops to plant them.

### More knowledge

Jamie Scott, Pierceton, joined the project to represent veteran cover crop growers. He and his dad, Jim, have used no-till and cover crops for a long time. Seeding cover crops on time in the fall is job one, Scott says. His method of choice is aerial application into standing crops.

He even helps organize aerial seeding on a large number of custom acres, besides on his own farm. “It’s the most economical method for us,” he says. “You get the cover crop seeding on a more timely basis, and don’t have labor and repair cost for someone running a drill later.”

Scott believes in cover crops because he’s seen the benefits firsthand. They include increased organic matter in the soil, nutrient recycling, more biological activity and improved water infiltration. “The biggest advantage is increased profit,” he says. “Profit is what matters.”