

Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association SOIL CHAMPION

Twenty-inch corn and soybean rows my biggest success, says Soil Champion



Henry Denotter, 2021 OSCIA Soil Champion in the producer category, shows off his commemorative baseball bat.



Even seemingly small things can have a positive impact on soil health, believes one of this year's two Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association (OSCIA) Soil Champions. That outlook combined with developing a system for 20-inch corn and soybean rows and a keen interest in soil health improvement garnered grain farmer Henry Denotter the award in the producer category.

Denotter and his wife started farming in 1986 with his parents on their farm in southern Essex County. Today, they farm together with their younger son, growing corn, soybeans, wheat and cover crops on land that is mostly Brookston Clay.

"In most cases, it's not that forgiving. If you stomp on it when it's wet, it becomes poor quality cement. You have to be patient with this land," says Denotter.

His soil health improvement activities started decades ago when he planted his first crop of no-till soybeans on 30-inch rows and ended up with yields 10 bushels per acre higher than on his father's surrounding conventionally tilled fields.

Today, the aim is to be 100% no-till every year, all fields are grid soil sampled regularly, and fertilizer is applied in-furrow for minimal soil disturbance.

Denotter's cover crops include a mix of oats, radish, vetch, crimson clover, corn and sunflowers, preferably direct-seeded with an air seeder, and he's also experimenting with buckwheat.

"We've developed a market for buckwheat over the last couple of years. We probably don't make enough on the buckwheat, but I like its root system: it will bring phosphorus back up to the surface," he says.

His biggest success story, though, has been transitioning to 20-inch rows in his no-till corn and soybeans. A presentation at Southwest Agricultural Conference led him to buy a 24-row 20" planter and build a 20" row head. Today, Denotter uses a fully computerized 40-ft, 24-row 20-inch corn planter that he's custom-built to suit his specifications and uses with 12-inch tires on the tractor to avoid driving on the row.

"Everything is quick-attach and you can change a snout in 20 seconds. We take the same planter to last year's corn field, move over 10 inches and plant soybeans in between the corn rows, all no-till. By mid-July, the corn stalks from last year are gone, and the beans are up and doing fine," he says.

His other big success is the modified air seeder he bought and rebuilt that is completely convertible to accommodate multiple crops and fertilizer.

Denotter's current focus is on the buckwheat and working with researchers to see what impact it has on the soil. It's one of many research projects he has been involved with over the years, including seed variety trials, and research projects led by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, OSCIA and Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural

Affairs. His farm is a field site for University of Waterloo research, he's a member of the University of Windsor's Farm Advisory Board for the Health Headwaters Lab, which helps direct agricultural research in Essex.

He's also a past president of OSCIA and the Essex Soil and Crop Improvement Association, past president of the Essex Conservation Club and a member of the Soil Network. He hosts farm tours, participates in articles and videos, and speaks at meetings to demonstrate innovation.

And although he's won other awards over the years, like the Essex Conservation Farm Award, induction into the Essex County Agricultural Hall of Fame and numerous Essex Regional Conservation Authority recognitions, there's something special about being named Soil Champion.

"It's like icing on the cake. This has been part of my focus for the last 20 years and I didn't realize how much I'd done in that time," he says. "And sometimes even the smallest thing can improve soil health - every little bit can make a difference."

The other 2021 Soil Champion Award winner was Laura Van Eerd in the research/extension specialist category. Nominations for 2022 can be submitted any time up to November 1, 2021.

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