

Considerations When Selecting Corn Varieties on Dairy Operations

If you ask any dairy farmer what's most important to his operation almost all of them will say "the cows come first", which isn't a surprise because the cows pay the bills. But in the same conversation, to be able to optimize production on those milking cows the feed rations need to be finely tuned. Currently in Manitoba, the #1 feed used in dairy rations today is corn silage. Corn provides high energy content to the rations and if using corn silage, you add fibre and massive tons of feed compared to other sources. Therefore, corn variety selection should be a high priority in the decision making and planning process. We will discuss the main factors that need to be considered when selecting corn varieties for a dairy operation. But, the first thing that needs to be asked when considering corn in a feed ration is "what are my goals"?

There are many corn varieties available on the market today. So, ask yourself, what do I want to get from my corn? From here, you can start to narrow down the list of varieties extremely fast. You can't think of every variety as a "Swiss army knife", they don't all work in every scenario and situation. You can start by thinking how will the corn be used in my ration, is it rated for silage, is it a high moisture corn, earlage/coblage or is it going in as processed dry corn. From here we can start narrowing down options. For example, if I am growing for dry corn to then process, I firstly need a variety that is the proper maturity for the area. The corn needs to reach maturity to be able to maximize on the investment, therefore the normal corn heat units (CHU's) need to be determined for the area, and you can select a variety that fits that. Also, if you are growing for dry corn, high moisture, or even coblage and earlage, the cob is the majority of what is going to be harvested. Therefore, grain yield is a big factor, so looking at variety yield research in your area will help you in the selection process. It's essential to know that not all varieties work in all environments (especially if we consider disease pressure in the area), talk to your local Shur-Gro Sales Agronomist to assist you in determining what variety is best suited for your soils.

If corn silage is your chosen option, more questions need to be asked. Yes, yield and CHU's are factors, but now you have to ask yourself what kind of yield are you expecting. With corn silage yield means something different to an array of producers. To some, high tonnage with adequate starch (cobs) is the goal. To others, tonnage is a lower priority but high starch percentages (high energy) and high feed quality is the objective. The producer needs to decide how corn silage can bring the most value to the cows ration. Remember 70% of the silage yield comes from the cob. There isn't a variety available that can do all these perfectly, so determining exactly what your expectations are is critical. Another variable to consider is, can the producer chop the corn themselves or are they relying on a custom chopper. If you own a chopper then you have a wider window of options, you can select a dual-purpose variety or a "true" silage variety. "True" silage corn dries down more slowly, whereas everything else has been bred to dry down more quickly. Currently the term "dual purpose" is getting used a lot, meaning the corn can be used as a silage or as a grain corn. But producers need to understand that dual purpose corn was bred to be a grain corn, but they have traits that allow them to be suited as a silage as well. If custom chopping is hired out on your farm, then selecting a silage variety is significant because you will have a wider window of harvesting without sacrificing the feed quality. The chances of getting a custom chopper on farm at the precise moment the corn reaches desirable moisture levels is almost impossible so it's highly recommended that the producer selects a silage hybrid in this scenario.

These are some of the main factors that need to be considered when selecting corn varieties for a dairy operation. It's important to talk to your feed rep/nutritionist in determining what your goals are for your corn crop and how it will be used in your ration and operation. Subsequently speaking to your local Shur-Gro Sales Agronomist can help determine what varieties are and will be best suited for your farm.



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Corey Blad
Assistant Manager &
Sales Agronomist