

News Column
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LATE PLANTED CORN

Hank Kimball is my hero. I don't strive to be like Hank every day, but when I have to say it depends, could be, possibly, or maybe,... then I think of Hank.

Hank Kimball was the County Agent on the Green Acres TV show that aired from 1965 to 1971. Others will remember different things about Hank, but what I remember is that he could never really come up with a definitive answer when Oliver asked him farming questions. He talked in circles and often ended with, "What was the question?"

Hank came to mind today as I was digging for research to tell me exactly when to plant corn in Kansas. Crop insurance providers give us a window from April 5 to May 25 to plant corn in Riley County, but does research agree with those dates?

We know research doesn't necessarily agree with April 5 being the day we should start planting corn each year. Soil temperature, and not the calendar, should determine when we start planting. This year it was about April 15 before the soil temperature was above 50 degrees Fahrenheit and warm enough to plant corn.

What about May 25 being the last day to plant corn and still be able to fully insure it? Does research agree with that date?

Under irrigation, where moisture is not limiting, the research seems to agree with the crop insurance folks. Earlier planting usually results in higher yields.

Under dryland conditions the story is different. In planting date studies done in 2018 and

2019 at Ottawa and Topeka, corn planted the last week of May and the first week of June yielded slightly better than earlier planted corn. Those were years when hot and dry periods in July affected yields of earlier planted corn.

At the same locations in 2020, corn planted the end of April through mid-May had the highest yields. That was a year when above average rainfall in July was favorable for pollination. Corn planted the first week of June in 2020 yielded about 70% of the highest yields in the study.

If that was the only planting date study I looked at, I might choose the third week of May as my target for planting dryland corn, to at least be near the top yield each year.

Planting date studies done at Belleville, Manhattan, and Hutchinson in 2013 and 2014 complicate my decision making. In those studies, if the season proved to be a high stress environment (hot, dry mid-summer conditions), then yield continued to drop as corn was planted later in the season. There wasn't a later June date that provided higher yields.

In the same studies, earlier planting provided the highest yields if conditions were good during the entire growing season. However, if there was early stress – cool weather and wet conditions that limited early growth – then yields continued to climb as corn was planted later in the season, past mid-June.

What was the question?

I think I was trying to define the ideal range of dates for planting dryland corn in Riley county. In Hank-like fashion, I have circled the topic without coming up with a good answer.

Now, if you could predict when it is going to be rainy and cool in the middle of the summer, then we would time our planting so pollination would happen during that week. That is the planting date that will result in the highest yields.

We are past the May 25 cutoff date for fully insuring a corn crop, but I probably wouldn't

let that stop me if I still had corn I wanted to plant. Sometimes you'll beat the earlier planted corn and sometimes you won't. Weather conditions in July and August will determine who wins.

There's your answer, but... what was the question?

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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