

# Berks County farmers tell how they have changed their tillage and planting methods

By LAURELSCHAEFFER  
Staff Correspondent  
READING — Tillage and corn planting methods are progressively changing in Berks County. Many area

farmers are setting aside conventional tillage practices for the more time and labor saving techniques of minimum tillage and no-till planting.

Chisel plowing has become increasingly popular over the last several years for corn production, because, as many farmers explained, it puts the soil in a better

condition by leaving the previous crops' residue near the surface to protect the soil from erosion and drying out too quickly. As Robert Kopfer, Fleetwood R2, explained, "Leaving the crop residues near the surface keeps the ground softer on top. It acts as a sponge, retaining moisture that would otherwise be baked out by the sun."

"Plowed ground is more 'Cloddy,'" explained Lester Gelsinger, Wernersville, but the biggest return in chisel plowing is erosion control, he added. Reflecting on the past, Gelsinger noted the "old way" was to work the ground well before planting so it would need less cultivation, "but now you don't work the ground and don't cultivate it either." Rae Hix, Mohrsville said that when his sons first started chiseling on his farm in 1973, he thought the fields looked bad, and wanted to wait to see what grew before he would accept the practice. "Now I will never go back to moldboarding," he stated, "it costs too much."

Most of these farmers have not sold their moldboards however. The Hix's use a moldboard to plow down sod, but have chiseled hay fields after the first cutting, and have found it makes a good seedbed. "If you are going to chisel sod," remarked Hix's son John, "it should be done early." Harold Leshar, of Way-Har Farms, Bernville, also told Lancaster Farming that they have kept a moldboard plow, even though they have been no-tilling for the past five years.

"We moldboard our fields after they have been no-tilled for four years," Leshar explained, primarily to turn under small brush that may be starting to grow. This year they have turned under about 35 acres. Kopfer, however, has sold his moldboard plow, noting that he hasn't moldboarded in four years and hasn't had any problems. In fact he has been doing better. "Land-sides and shins are too expensive," he commented.

Lester Gelsinger also keeps his moldboard for turning under sod only, commenting that he would not invest any money in a new one. The Gelsingers have tried no-tilling corn and have been pleased with their results. This year they will also no-till some corn during their later planting, in a field of rye after it has been taken off.

Kopfer has planted corn after only discing but believes he will stay with chisel plowing unless he finds he doesn't have the time in the future. Kopfer has no-tilled barley and soybeans however, and has been very satisfied with his results.

Kopfer has been using a plain chisel plow with curved teeth but feels he may try using one that has a row of discs in the front. After chiseling, the ground is gone over with an off-set disc and then planted with a no-till air planter. This is the third season for his planter which has been equipped with a seed monitor to keep a constant check on which rows are planting.

Kopfer has changed from 38 inch rows to 36 inch rows but won't go to narrow rows, explaining that he does not see any advantage to the narrower rows. Seed population rates have been increased over the years however, "I try to have 23 to 24,000 plants per acre at harvest," he remarked. Kopfer also has started to plant his corn crop earlier after he noticed his later corn was not quite as heavy as the earlier corn. "I try to start planting corn by April 18 but this year it wasn't until the 22nd," he remarked. Having the corn in early helps reduce the hay and barley rush, he added.

Hix uses a chisel plow equipped with discs after first using a plain chisel plow. It does a nicer job, he says. After chiseling the ground, is discing twice. The second time herbicides are incorporated. A spray tank has been added to the disc. "Next year we want to use a field cultivator with the sprayer to even the field out better," said John.

Hix feels that by going over the fields twice the herbicides work better, and by changing to a field cultivator on the final time

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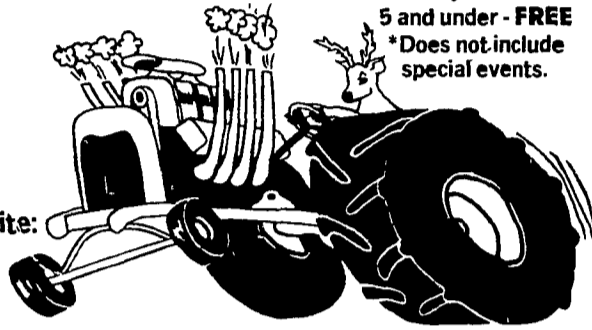
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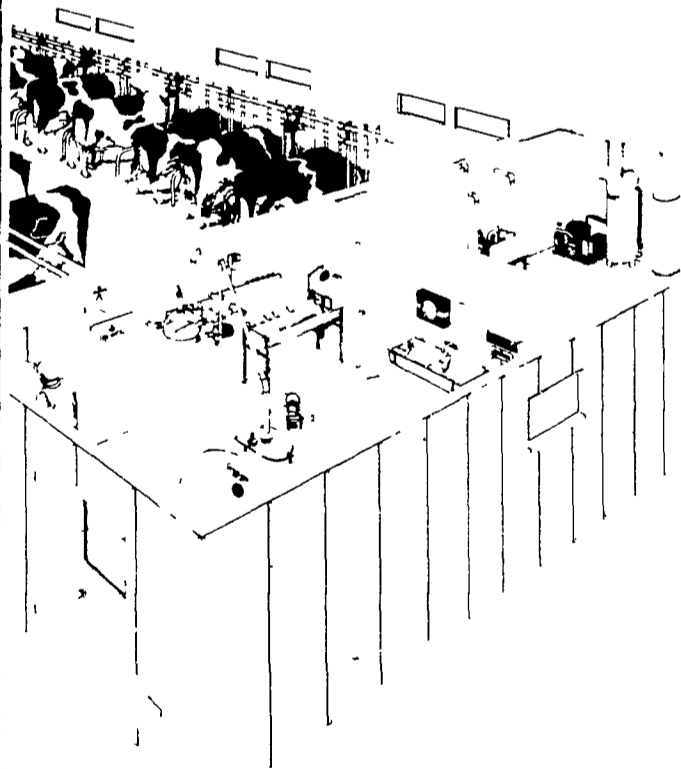
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