

Crop Production

Seed company has full organic line

By FRAN O'LEARY

BLUE River Hybrids is the largest organic seed company in the U.S. Headquartered in Kelley, Iowa, the company markets a full line of corn and soybean hybrids, and alfalfa, red clover and sudangrass varieties to organic producers across Wisconsin and

Key Points

- Blue River Hybrids is the largest organic seed company in the U.S.
- The company started in 2005 and is headquartered in Iowa.
- Blue River Hybrids has 20 dealers across Wisconsin.

much of the rest of the country.

"What is kind of unique about us is that we only sell organic seed," says Maury Johnson, owner and president of Blue River Hybrids. "Most of the other companies have an organic division."

After working in the organic seed business since 1999, Johnson started Blue River Hybrids in 2005. He visited

with organic dairy, beef and crop producers at the Blue River Hybrids booth in Tent City during Wisconsin Farm Technology Days at the Crave Brothers Farm near Waterloo.

Johnson says Blue River has 20 dealers located throughout Wisconsin.

"We try to identify the organic hybrids and varieties that will do well for organic producers," he explains. "The conventional producer can spray the corn to get rid of weeds or use stacked hybrids. For organic producers, none of these things are permitted."

Growing organic

According to the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, Wisconsin has more than 1,400 organic farms with more than 147,000 acres in organic production. Another 34,000 acres is being converted to organic production. As a result, Wisconsin is second only to California in the number of organic farms and acreage. Organic production in Wisconsin has grown by 90% in the past seven years.

Johnson estimates that 80% of corn and 90% of soybeans grown in Wisconsin are GMO.

"It's often difficult to find non-Roundup Ready soybeans. But we offer them," he says. "We have soybean varieties that will grow from northern Wisconsin and North Dakota to southern Kansas. We have quite a variety of maturities."

Johnson says Blue River's corn hybrids grow vigorously, and its corn silage hybrids grow tall with softer kernels.

He says Blue River Hybrids is also unique because "we have

a testing effort to look at non-GMO corn and soybeans. A lot of companies don't test these hybrids and varieties."

While Blue River doesn't actively market its products to conventional producers, according to Johnson, they are purchasing at least one product.

"One of the things I see with conventional producers is they are not switching to organic, but they are planting red clover for cover crops because it saves them money," he says. "I think there is also concern among some conventional producers that all of these chemicals they are using may be impacting them and/or their families."

Johnson believes organic farmers aren't turning back the clock by the way they farm, "they're just farming smarter and better," he says. "I think 50 years from now we'll look back and say, 'What were we thinking?'"

Blue River organic corn hybrids sell for between \$140 and \$180 per bag. "Our prices and the performance of our corn hybrids are competitive with conventional hybrids," Johnson says. "We don't think an organic producer needs to get any less yield potential than a conventional producer."



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