

# Organic grower looking at seeds' sunny side

By Sara Bredesen

Regional Editor

**ROSENDALE** — Kevin Ferguson said the 14 acres of alternating rows of corn and black oil sunflowers at his certified organic Fond du Lac County dairy farm have caused some of his neighbors to ask if something was wrong with his planter last spring.

"It was a great attraction when they were first (planted)," Ferguson said. "Everybody's looking over the fence at them. The neighbors are saying, 'Now what are you doing, Ferguson?'"

Sunflowers are a new crop in the area, and Ferguson has gone a step further by being the first to grow a new organic variety called Sierra Organic, offered by Blue River Hybrids.

Certified organic growers have had the option of planting untreated conventional sunflower seeds when nothing else was available, according to Maury Johnson, director of production and sales at Blue River Hybrids in Kelley, Iowa. The company released Sierra Organic last spring and made limited quantities available in Wisconsin.

Blue River Hybrids developed an oil variety because some dairy farmers like to include sunflowers in their silage mixture, Johnson said. Others are pressing oil for



Photo by Sara Bredesen

Kevin Ferguson of Rosendale stood among the double crop of sunflowers and corn at his Fond du Lac County organic farm. Ferguson planned to chop the two crops together for silage for his dairy herd.

direct sale, and Organic Valley in La Farge is encouraging members to move to biofuels with sunflower oil as a component,

he said. Ferguson said he had heard good and bad things about raising sunflowers but was willing to give it

a try to get more energy into his cows. He said it's hard to keep the butterfat and body weight up when he takes them off his rota-

tionally grazed pastures for the winter. Corn silage doesn't do it, and too much grain causes acidosis, he said.

His plan is to chop the corn and whole sunflowers together and ensile them in bags.

"The true test is, will my cows be more than glad to eat it (or) will they turn their nose up at it?" he said.

Ferguson said he has always been willing to try something out of the ordinary.

"Fourteen acres is a lot just to see if it will work, but I decided if I'm going to do it I'm going to jump in with both feet," he said.

Ferguson said the crop was planted after peas on Father's Day and tested 68 percent moisture for the corn and 72 percent for the sunflowers Sept. 7. He's waiting for the right time to chop.

Blue River aimed to get some of the seed into the hands of Wisconsin organic farmers this past spring so they could try it, Johnson said. Test plots in South Dakota suggested that the Sierra variety would produce good seed and oil yields in central and southern Wisconsin.

"With the average moisture in Wisconsin, these are sunflowers that are probably going to get 6 foot," he said.

Ferguson's sunflowers are easily 6 feet tall. He said it also makes a difference to him that they

are organic. He can roast the seeds right out of the field and eat them without worrying about genetically modified organisms, he said.

"You can do that with conventional too, but I'm not a GMO person," he said. "I'm all about trying to be without that stuff. If you're organic, you're non-GMO."

Johnson said it probably will take a year or two for growers to realize there's an organic seed option available.

Sunflowers aren't likely to take over the Wisconsin landscape, however.

"We think that sunflowers have a good place in a rotation, and for some of the uses, like in the silage, I think it makes a lot of sense for a limited number of people to grow them," Johnson said. "There's never going to be as many people growing sunflowers as corn or soybeans, but for the people that do, we're just trying to provide some good seed organically."

Ferguson said he has been intrigued watching the sunflowers grow from flower to seed head. When he looks out his door he sees yellow and green.

"It looks like a hell of a good experiment. It really does," he said. "If it works, I will continue doing it."

Sara Bredesen can be reached at 715-360-7253 or [stbrede@gmail.com](mailto:stbrede@gmail.com).