

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Old Wild Rice Now a New Crop

For the first time in his 49-year farming career, Ivan Keller is growing wild rice on his land in Louisa County. Primarily a corn and soybean farmer, Keller is now growing wild rice through a cooperative research program, because he feels it will benefit wildlife and because he is just plain curious about the plant.

The Keller farm, near Wapello, is close to the Mississippi River where there is a history of naturally occurring wild rice.

Often called the oldest agricultural crop in the nation, wild rice was once prevalent from Manitoba to Florida. However, changing the landscape by draining wetlands seems to have wiped out wild rice from Iowa and much of its traditional range. Keller's wild rice patch of 20 plants is part in an experiment to reintroduce the plant to the Mississippi River Valley from Cape Girardeau, Missouri to Savanna, Illinois.

Wild rice is an annual grass growing upwards of 15-feet tall that needs water to grow. Water levels are critical and wild rice does best in the presence of flowing water. Rivers and lakes that have inlets and outlets are optimal.

In the case of Keller's farm, the wild rice is growing in a shallow water Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) wetland protected by a berm with an overflow. Spring and tile line fed, Keller's wetland stays at a pretty constant level and then flows into a neighbor's shallow water wetland. The stair step wetlands keep a local road from flooding



Drew DeLang and Ivan Keller with Wild Rice.

and take sediment and nutrients out of the water before it flows into Lake Odessa and the Port Louisa National Wildlife Refuge.

In the spring of 2007, Keller was approached by U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) District Conservationist Drew DeLang and Missouri State graduate biology student Bethany Dalrymple to participate in the project. Keller's farm and two others, a Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) site and the other a farm pond, are project sites. In the spring, DeLang and Dalrymple set up six predator-proof mesh enclosures per site, planted three one-foot tall plants per enclosure and scattered wild rice seeds for good measure.

Beth Dalrymple's wild rice experiment is part of on-going research she and her father, Ken Dalrymple, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, have been conducting since 2000 when Spring Lake, near Pekin, Ill., was drawn down for the first time in 50 years. Long dormant wild rice

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seed in the lake bed germinated and grew. The Dalrymples saw this as an opportunity to experiment with wild rice so they collected seed from the mature plants at that site and formed a plan to grow wild rice in their own farm pond.

Seven years later wild rice in their farm pond continues to reproduce and they have a steady supply of seed to conduct additional experiments on the Keller farm and 19 other sites in the Mississippi River basin.

“I want to get the basics down for this plant,” says Beth Dalrymple, “and find out where we can plant it successfully. When we plant it we want it to grow and reproduce. Wild rice loves nitrogen and high pH water while it cleans and filters the water around it. It is great food for wildlife.”



Louisa County District Conservationist Drew DeLang holds a wild rice seed head in August 2007. DeLang is helping a graduate biology student reintroduce wild rice to three sites in the southeast Iowa county in an effort to restore beneficial aquatic plants to wetlands.



DeLang and Keller examine a stand of wild rice on the edge of a wetland on Keller's farm. Wild rice, which can grow 15 feet tall, was once prevalent throughout Iowa.

NRCS Biologist Mark Lindflott is very interested in the Louisa County experiments. “NRCS has assisted many landowners to restore wetlands on their land through the CRP and WRP,” said Lindflott. “Many of these restored wetlands would benefit from the ability to add native wild rice to these sites. The Louisa County experiments will help provide methods for establishing wild rice in Iowa and will provide stock to increase the supply of seed for this important wild-life plant.”

Dalrymple notes that the wild rice used in this experiment is not the same as the wild rice harvested for food in northern Minnesota and Wisconsin. The northern rice is a shorter plant that matures all at once making harvesting easier. This wild rice variety grows 15 feet tall and the seed matures at a constant rate giving birds and animals a steady supply of food during the growing season as well as helping keep water clean.

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For additional information about growing wild rice, contact Wayne Loveless at Forest Keeling Nursery at www.fknursery.com or Ken Dalrymple at 636-578-3381.

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