

Pre Post Mortem

what happened & why

I had high hopes for growing hemp for fiber in Santa Rosa NM with Jonas Thaler, my papermaking schoolmate. I even had a relatively detailed spreadsheet that broke it all down into a best case scenario. Twas not to be.

Growing Fiber Isn't the Same As Growing Flower

I underestimated what it takes to grow fiber plants. I'd only grown hemp for flower in years past.

I Bought the Wrong Seeds

I've grown a monoecious fiber cultivar from Hemp Traders the last two years. When I ordered more seeds for this year I didn't read the description closely enough. While the English translation of the cultivar was the same, the original Chinese name was different. In my haste hitting the Buy button I missed reading the new text section describing the seeds as dioecious. As a result there were male and female flowers which produced seeds. On top of that, the flowers tested hot, 0.68% to be exact. Interestingly there were trace amounts of THCV and CBDV.

I've asked the New Mexico Dept of Agriculture to allow us to "shred" the bast off the stem using it to do R&D on papermaking and composting the rest of the plant material.

Late Start Without Drip Irrigation

We didn't start working the field until June 12th and planted on July 8th. Between the 12th and 8th the weeds had a huge head start. The hemp never had a chance to outgrow and overshadow the weeds. Two takeaways: plant immediately after disturbing the soil and exposing the weed seeds and plant seedlings whenever possible to get a jump on the weeds. Plant waves of seedlings over a period of time and backfill with direct seeding as needed.

The acequia system and historical irrigation practices in Guadalupe County were totally new to me. The idea of turning on a fire hose and flooding the field from one end to the other left me stunned and speechless. Not only was I afraid it would wash the seeds downhill, there was no way to introduce fertilizer or set up a timer. Fortunately Jonas took on the responsibility and did an admirable job. Drip lines rock!

I Wasn't In New Mexico Often Enough Or Long Enough

I had no idea what to expect this summer. We started from scratch never having done fiber before and not having a clue what we were doing. I underestimated the challenges of living in Seattle and farming in New Mexico. My learning curve took up more time than I thought it would. Growing fiber outside of Cascadia was a bit out of my comfort zone at first.

Using a timeline & calendar makes it obvious when I need to be on site. In the Spring, popping seeds, raising waves of seedlings while cutting the cover crop and prepping the field means I need to park my ass there as long as it takes. Another burst starts with the second wave of seedlings which rolls into harvesting the first crop and replanting the second crop. A pause and then the second harvest and the winter cover crop.

Learning the Terroir

I can't say I'm a big fan of triple digit temperatures but until it hits 105 I try not to pay no never mind. The monsoons are something to behold and respect given that they're often accompanied by thunder and lightning of epic proportions. I want to follow up with getting the historical weather data from the local airport.

High on my list closing out this first year is getting soil and water samples tested. Essential data points moving forward.

Two Words: Weed Pressure

As described above a winter cover crop goes a long way to suppressing weeds early on. Transitioning to a no-till farm will expose fewer and fewer seeds each time we plant. Plant or transplant immediately after exposing the soil. We need to plant at a higher seed density, 30 to 40 pounds per acre. Taller stalks, fewer weeds. What's not to like?

In the End, It Went Hot

As of now, the Dept of Ag will decide what we can and can't do. I just want the bast, the rest can be composted. To me this summer was tuition for the school of hard knocks. Missteps and mistakes often teach us lessons we never forget and sometimes lead us to better answers and solutions.

All of the Above Rests on My Shoulders

None of the above has anything to do with making paper. Jonas is the paper maker and I'm the hemp farmer. From seeds to weeds I wasn't in The Land of Enchantment often enough and/or at the right time. Spreadsheets don't necessarily map to calendars and itineraries very well. Next year will be different.

2022, and beyond!

Planning using a timeline and a calendar instead of one of my wacky spreadsheets.

First things first, we end the 2021 season by planting Crimson Clover as a winter cover crop. This will build organic matter in the soil and help suppress weeds. Chop'n'drop in the Spring immediately before transplanting and direct seeding.

With the proper planning we can grow two crops in one season using seedlings as well as direct seeding.

- stick to the calendar
- the calendar changes
- the calendar has nothing to do with the weather and the weather doesn't believe in calendars
- in the end, farming is gambling in the dirt. act accordingly.

Measure & test. Measure & test. Measure And Test. There's no excuse for going hot. Better to cut 2 days early than 1 day late. Actually unless we're growing smokeable or medicinal plants we cut before the plant flowers. No inflorescence, no cannabinoids. Done.

We have an infrastructure and it's getting bigger and better (composting, seedling nursery, etc.) Let's apply what we learned in '21 in '22.