



## 100 years celebrated with cover crops

*Chris Hardie For Agri-View | May 6, 2019*

LA CROSSE, Wis. – The world of agriculture has changed dramatically since 1919 when La Crosse Seed first set roots.

The La Crosse-based company is celebrating its 100th year in business with an eye toward continued growth in the turfgrass, forage-crop and cover-seed-crop market in the Midwest.

“As we look back and celebrate a century of service, we’re extremely thankful for our customers and other partners who’ve supported us along the way,” said Dan Foor, CEO of La Crosse Seed.

The century mark came as a surprise to the company, which was believed to have begun in 1947. But some employees digging into the company’s past recently discovered old images, directories and articles that show that La Crosse Seed began in 1919. That’s when two executives from John A. Salzer Seed Co. – which once occupied an entire city block and was one of the largest mail-order garden-seed companies of its day – helped form the company.

La Crosse Seed remained affiliated with Salzer for many years. The Salzer family sold its business in 1945 but La Crosse Seed continued to operate. It was part of a four-way merger of seed companies in 1961; it was purchased by Ramy Seed Co. in 1965. The company was sold to AgriBioTech in 1997 and then spun off as La Crosse Forage & Turf Seed in 2000.

La Crosse Seed itself was acquired this past year by DLF Pickseed, a global company based in Denmark. And in December La Crosse Seed announced that it bought Heritage Seed Company in Madison, Wisconsin.

To celebrate and thank its customers, the company has launched a “Thank You for 100 Years” campaign. It’s providing anniversary gifts for customers – many of which have been customers for multiple generations. La Crosse Seed will also donate to the National FFA Foundation on behalf of customers through its “Pave the Way for Next 100” program.

The milestone is significant because of continued industry consolidation. An important aspect of the DLF purchase was that it plans to allow La Crosse Seed to operate as an independent entity, Foor said. La Crosse Seed can continue to focus on growing its seed business, but will have access to the research and development as well as the support of a major global business.

When La Crosse Seed began the agriculture world consisted of many smaller farms. The local market in the Driftless Region Area had many farms with steep topography. The main seed business then was red clover and timothy, which farmers planted for hay, Foor said.

Today red clover is used more as green manure legume for crop rotation and cover-cropping systems. Most red clover seed production comes from Oregon and Canada, with the latter also growing most of the timothy.

It’s the growth in the use of cover crops by farmers that has been the biggest change during the past 20 years, Foor said. La Crosse Seed custom-blends and packages specific seed mixes. Much of the primary seed is cereal or winter rye, a fast-growing cool-season cover crop that suppresses weeds, holds residual nitrogen and is an excellent cover crop between plantings of corn or soybeans. It can also be used as a forage crop.

This past year La Crosse Seed sold more than 22.5 million pounds of cover-crop seed that was used on more than 900,000 acres and 11,000 farms.

“Cover-crop seeds has grown eight-fold,” Foor said. “It’s almost half of what we do.”

He attributes that growth to a heightened awareness of the part cover crops play in healthy soil.

“There’s an appreciation for the role of cover crops as being an investment in soil health and resilience,” he said. “You want to keep things growing on the soil as long as you can.”

Agriculture Census numbers reflect that growth. Cover-crop acres grew from 10.3 million acres in 2012 to 15.4 million acres in 2017, according to the just-released 2017 Census of Agriculture.

What hasn't changed in 100 years is the La Crosse Seeds focus on the customer, Foor said. The La Crosse facility has four mixing lines that can create packages of 1 pound up to a ton, with most seeds shipped in 50-pound bags. The company has its own distribution network with a number of different seed brands.

"Our customers rely on us for everything but seed corn and soybeans," Foor said.

What does the future of the seed business look like? Foor anticipates the cover-crop business will continue to grow – along with a focus on sustainability, more interest from people as to where their food comes from and conservation.

"We also need to understand agriculture's role in addressing climate change," he said.

The seed market is competitive. La Crosse Seeds has made strides in building its biggest asset, he said – its employees.

"We have competitors and we need to fight for everything," Foor said.

Visit [www.lacrosseseed.com](http://www.lacrosseseed.com) for more information. Visit [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com) and search for "[La Crosse Seed](#)" to see videos.