

# Oklahoma wheat varieties stand tough in Texas



*Blaise Wilde, of Wall, Texas, proposed to his wife Neva in a wheat field planted to one of his favorite varieties, Oklahoma State University-bred Smith's Gold. As a young farmer, he strives to combine the best wheat genetics with proven management approaches and remains optimistic about the future of the crop, due to its hardiness and low cost-of-production.*

By Candace Krebs  
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In the coming weeks Blaise Wilde will continue to inspect his fields for damage from mid-February's arctic assault on Texas, but for now the wheat grower from Wall is feeling optimistic.

"We got through it better than we thought we would," he said. "The older, growthier wheat got a little burned on the top. You can see it's brown across the field. But

the younger stuff seems to be holding up fine. It doesn't seem to have set it back any."

Wilde, who farms a combination of dryland and irrigated wheat across five West Central Texas counties, is already noticing some differences in how the crop took the extreme weather compared to neighboring fields.

"We'll know better over the next few weeks how much damage we had to it, but it looks like the Oklahoma

State varieties took the storm better than some of their competitors," he said.

Texas A&M agronomists believe the most severe damage is likely further east along the I-35 corridor or further north on the High Plains, where wheat was already stressed by extreme drought.

Leaf burn alone doesn't typically indicate significant yield reduction, especially at the growth stage of most Texas wheat when the storm hit, experts say.

The Wilde farm, located on the flat plains just west of where the Texas hill country begins, is planted entirely to varieties that were developed 450 miles north at Oklahoma State University.

The family found their preferred source of wheat genetics several years ago when Wilde's dad Dale was looking for better drought tolerance and came across OSU's Duster.

"Since then, we've just gone to planting more of their varieties, with other kinds of insect and disease resistance, and they've performed very well for us," Wilde said.

So well, in fact, that he's been a statewide first place winner in the National Wheat Yield Contest two years running. In 2019, he won the dryland category with a variety called Lonerider, a descendent of Duster with wide adaptability across dry environments. A year later, he topped the irrigated category with Showdown, which is known for high yield potential.

He also grows a third OSU variety, Smith's Gold, which is distinguished by exceptional grain quality.

His progressive approach to variety selection is something that sets him apart from other wheat farmers. Scott Halfmann works with as an agronomist for Nutrien.

"A lot of guys in our area find a variety they really like and stick with it, but Blaise and his family do some of their own trials on their farm. They look for the newer varieties and stay on top what works best for each of their locations," Halfmann said.

### Winning with Wheat

Wilde is the fourth generation of his family to grow wheat. He and his younger brother Harrison operate the farm with their parents, Dale and Laura. Their great-grandparents first bought land in the Wall area in 1904 when it was still prairie and could be purchased for a few dollars an acre.

In the 1940s, Wilde's ancestors pioneered cotton production in and around St. Lawrence, which grew to become the area's predominant crop. Wilde and his family chose

to stick with wheat instead, but they approach it with the same management intensive care generally reserved for higher value crops.

Wilde describes the family operation as "old school" in many ways, but also insists they've perfected their niche by staying true to what they do well and building on time-tested methods.

They start by planting treated seed, which insures the crop gets off to a good start.

Their biggest disease challenge is typically leaf rust under center pivot irrigation, so they monitor it closely and proactively apply a fungicide early in the season as needed.

The grain is harvested in May and June, and in the following months the straw is reincorporated back into the soil with a disk or chisel to enhance organic matter and improve moisture retention.

Halfmann, the farm's consulting agronomist, notes that as Wilde has taken over more responsibilities within the operation, he's upped their game by making sure they don't cut corners on inputs such as nitrogen fertilizer.

"Because it's a monoculture, you have to worry about putting the right nutrients out there so you're not depleting the soil and really stay on top of that," Halfmann observed. "They are also using some of the newer herbicides for wild rye, wild oats and other weeds you sometimes get in wheat-on-wheat fields. They are really good about keeping their fields clean and handling that right."

Being in a limited rainfall area, they gain some additional benefit from growing a crop that uses the most irrigation water in the spring, rather than in the hot summer and early fall months, and leverage better prices through the use of on-farm storage, he said.

"Quite honestly, they are one of the farms in this area where other farmers go to ask about what's working," Halfmann said.

Farms focused exclusively on wheat are increasingly rare, as wheat acreage continues to decline across the Great Plains in favor of more diverse rotational cropping systems.

But Wilde remains optimistic about the future of wheat in part because of its significance as a food crop worldwide.

Though he started a wheat seed business two years ago and also grows foundation seed for Oklahoma

State's variety development and licensing program, most of what his family produces ends up going to mills to be made into bread products, something that keeps the importance of good milling and baking qualities always front and center for him. That aligns well with what OSU's program has to offer.

"The Oklahoma State varieties have never failed us in that regard," he said. "We never have to worry about quality when we plant OSU seed."

As the unusual sub-zero February cold snap showed, wheat has the ability to withstand erratic weather while requiring minimal inputs, which keeps production costs low, and all of that combined makes it an attractive crop, he said.

The final step toward insuring success is seeking out top genetics from a program like OSU that offers an all-around mix of reliable yield potential, disease resistance and grain quality.

"Farmers know wheat's a tough plant, and it will always produce for them," Wilde said. "It's the most commonly farmed agricultural plant in the world, and it will always be a staple, especially with the rising population."

**Oklahoma Genetics Inc. is the nonprofit licensing agent for wheat varieties developed by the Wheat Improvement Team at Oklahoma State University. In addition, OGI supports educational programs and scientific research to benefit crop producers and grain marketers in the Southern Plains. More info at OKGenetics.com.**