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Signs of Spring: Robins, Vultures, and Planting Corn

Roger Elmore, Department of Agronomy

Spring is imminent. Last week two robins sang high in one of our neighbor's oak trees. Soon a trio formed! We've endured a long, robin-less winter at least in northern Story County, Iowa. Recent news articles actually suggest though that robins often overwinter in Iowa and that Turkey Vultures are actually a better spring signal!

With the anticipation of spring comes the thought of planting corn, but not yet. What must we think about between now and that much-anticipated first day of planting? Here are some questions to ponder:

- What crop will you plant? Consider [facts](#) and [economics](#) not emotions. Watch crop and input prices. Remember the yield penalty for corn following corn hovers around 15 percent in Iowa.
- Have you ordered seed? Compare hybrid performance in [third-party tests](#) like those conducted by Iowa State University and other land-grant universities in relation to seed company reports.
- Is your [soil fertility](#) program planned? What about, weed, insect, and disease management? [Subscribe to the Integrated Crop management \(ICM\) News](#) to stay on top of these issues.
- Do you anticipate changing your tillage system? If so, think hard ... and fast. Search for 'tillage' in the ICM News.
- Are you staying with the same row spacing? Rows narrower than 30 inches don't appear to dramatically increase yields in Iowa but they do not lower yields either. As plant populations increase, narrower rows may eventually be more beneficial than 30 inches. See our [web page for information](#).
- What [seeding rate](#) will you target? Yields continue to increase in Iowa in part because we're increasing plant populations by over 400 plants per acre per year. Hybrids marketed today thrive with higher seeding rates than before. Although variability exists across locations, most producers should plant corn in the lower to mid-30,000 seeds per acre range given yield trends and economics.
- What are your plans for scouting? If you don't know what is happening in your field in 2009 you won't know what to work on to improve your management in 2010. The very best managers know what is going on in their fields. ISU [Extension's Agribusiness Education Program](#) coordinates many programs throughout the year that could improve your scouting skills.
- Is your planter ready? Gather tips from several articles by searching the ICM News site including this one: [Equipment maintenance: Planters](#).

This list includes several practices you have some control over. Continue to think and study topics that are important for your production system to help bring about a good 2009 season. Think about them as spring flies toward us.

Signs of spring...Turkey Vultures? I prefer to watch for robins and corn planters.

Roger Elmore is a professor of agronomy with research and extension responsibilities in corn production.

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