

By Dean Houghton

THE RECORD BREAKER

Kip Cullers looks to push yields to new heights

Everybody needs a challenge, and for Kip Cullers, the bigger the challenge, the better. That's why this southwest Missouri grower sets his sights on growing high yields of corn and soybeans—and is rewriting the record books along the way.

He claimed a world-record soybean yield of 139 bushels per acre with his 2006 entry in the Missouri Soybean Association Yield Contest. Nobody keeps track of the official world record, but experts believe the previous high yield was 118 bushels per acre.

Corn quest. Ironically, soybean production is not Culler's first love. "Growing high-yield corn is what really intrigues me," he says. It's no secret that he would like to hold the world record for corn yields as well. In the 2006 yield contest sponsored by the National Corn Growers Association, he grew the highest overall yield of nearly 348 bushels per acre. And two of his other irrigated entries placed second and third overall.

Cullers operates K&K Farms with partner Kevin Keeling in Newton County, just 40 miles as the crow flies from Branson, the entertainment capital of the Ozarks. It's not the deep, black soil you would find in Iowa or Illinois, where most folks figure such records would likely be broken.

►**Right:** Encouraging the soybean plant to produce and retain more pods per node was a key to Kip Cullers' record yield of 139 bushels per acre.

The soil type is Newtonia, a red sandy loam that responds well to irrigation. For two decades Cullers has honed his management on the farm's 5,000 crop acres by producing vegetable crops for Allen Canning Co. "I walk every field, every day, regardless of the crop," he points out.

His experience growing approximately 3,000 acres of green beans each year was put to good use in growing the world-record soybean crop. "We're used to dealing with bloom-and-pod abortion on green beans," he says. "You know that 56 days after you plant green beans, you're going to be harvesting them, whether they have one pod per plant or 25 pods. Since that has a direct impact on your pocketbook, you become a quick learner."

As hard as it may be to believe, the record soybean field was something of an afterthought. "We had grown 346 bushels of corn per acre on this field in 2005, which was the second highest yield in the NCGA contest," Cullers says. "We wanted to plant soybeans to capture some organic nitrogen and



improve the tilth of the soil to get it ready to raise a high-yield corn crop."

Running behind due to a wet spring, he didn't get the soybeans planted until May 20. He used a drill normally used to sow spinach to pack 300,000 seeds per acre into 7.5-inch rows. The variety was Pioneer 94M80, a late group IV. Once the soybeans got off to an impressive start, a Pioneer agronomist convinced Cullers to enter the yield contest rather than plowing them down. The rest is history.

Sharing secrets. Asking Cullers to tell how he grows record soybeans (or corn) is like asking Tiger Woods to explain how he hits a 200-yard 7 iron. Cullers is willing to share ideas, but warns that his is a total systems approach. "There's no silver bullet," he says. "You really have to do everything right." Doing things right includes picking the best possible genetics and then protecting yield potential by controlling weeds and using fungicides and insecticides as needed.

Three tons of turkey litter along with 200 pounds of 0-0-60, as well as some foliar feeding, provided fertility for the record crop. Irrigation was provided in small amounts during the heat of the day, keeping plants cool.

Cullers spends a lot of time punching a calculator to see how much more potential yield is out there. "I think in seeds per acre or kernels per acre," he says. His challenge is to keep pushing the envelope to capture those yields. ■

►**Left:** Kip Cullers likes the challenge of growing bin-busting corn that wins yield contests.

►**Below:** Lots of years producing picture-perfect green beans and other specialty vegetable crops helped Cullers develop the detailed management he credits for high yields of corn and soybeans.

