



How to buy your next planter

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Dustin Blunier, marketing communications manager for Precision Planting, heard one too many stories of farmers investing high hopes and a hundred thousand dollars in a new corn planter, only to find it performed worse than their old one.

“Guys would say, ‘If there’s one new thing I am going to buy for my operation when I’m farming, it’s a planter,’” Blunier recounts. “So they go and spend anywhere from fifty- to a hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars and find out later that their first-year stands are worse than the last two or three years when they were running a 20- or 25-year-old planter.”

He says the most common reason for the lag in performance is that buyers fail to get the planter outfitted or configured in a way that fits their farming conditions, unlike their old planter that they had fine-tuned over the years.

“Buying a planter is a very important decision, and it takes some time,” he says. “Really, it takes customization.”

In an attempt to prevent one more case of buyer’s remorse, the group at Precision Planting devised a purchase guide that outlines all the factors farmers need to consider before buying their next planter. Blunier says the buying process has gotten more complex over the years due to advances in equipment and an ever-increasing number of options designed to perfect the planting of corn. These include variable-rate seeding, swath control, bulk seed fill, automatic down-pressure control, narrow rows, twin rows, air-metering systems and planter monitors.

“You can’t go to your implement dealer and say, ‘Give me a corn planter’ with the underlying assumption that there is one planter that works for everyone,” he explains. “That just is not the scenario. You have to look at all the different options and how they are going to work on your operation.”

Because Precision Planting deals only in planter attachments, the company strives to be brand neutral when it comes to the planter itself. Blunier says there are strengths and weaknesses to every planter out there, so the key to buying is to identify them and find the system that will best address your biggest needs.

“There’s a lot of options to consider, and you need to take the approach of which ones fit my operation,” he says. “Your dealership is going to have options. Your Precision Planting dealer is going to have options. And it is important that all those fit together so you can make the most of each one.”

Here are the 10 factors Blunier says to consider.

1. Planter size

The first factor to consider when buying a planter is size. Blunier says most buyers are looking to upsize to cover additional acres within the same 10-day window typically available in the spring to plant corn. Sizes today range anywhere from 6 to 48 rows. “A good rule of thumb when sizing is to assume each row can cover 100 acres per season,” Blunier says.

“So a 12-row planter can cover 1,200 acres in the 10 days allotted for planting corn.”

Blunier outlines two alternatives to upsizing. One is to increase planting speeds without compromising seed spacing accuracy by using a planter monitor to check for skips and doubles. The second is to invest in a bulk-seed-handling system in place of individual hopper boxes to cut time spent filling the planter with seed, leaving you more time to plant.

2. Row spacing

Currently the most common row spacing is 30 in. However, some growers have recently switched to narrow rows (15-, 20- or 22-in. -row spacing) or twin rows to accommodate the increasing plant populations of today’s higher-yielding hybrids. Blunier’s advice? “Look at your planting population over the last five years and project what populations will be in three years. If you predict that your average populations will increase to where plant spacing is within 4 in. of each other, which is 36,000 plants/acre in 30-in. rows, while you own the new planter, take a serious look at a row-spacing change.”

3. Seed delivery

A third decision is whether to go with a bulk-fill system or individual hopper boxes to deliver seed. “Bulk-fill planters that distribute seed to row units decrease load time and the amount of seed handling, which saves time during planting,” Blunier says. “However, if you need or want to split hybrids, plant plots or split the planter for refuge hybrids — or would have other reasons to segregate seed — a row unit with standard boxes may be a better option.”

Also, examine how weight is distributed with each system. If most of the load is being passed to the ground through the center tires, soil compaction on middle rows can result. “We have seen 60-bu. decreases in yield checks between the center and wing sections of planters due to center-section compaction,” he says. Look for planters that have a weight transfer system that can move weight from the center section to the wings or that use flotation tires.

4. Meter

Planter meters should be able to provide 98.5% seed singulation or better to ensure your crop is planted correctly. This is true whether you go with mechanical finger units or vacuum meters. Blunier says, to ensure the best level of performance, you should get your meters calibrated by a planting expert. Meter upgrades are available if needed.

5. Drive system and variable-rate population systems

There are two types of meter drive systems: hydraulic and ground. “Ground drive systems offer simplicity and reliability,” Blunier says. “But they do not permit on-the-go changes to population to match yield zones or soil types. Hydraulic drive systems are more expensive and complex, but offer the advantages of variable-rate population control and a smoother drive system, which can improve meter performance.”

If switching from ground drive to hydraulic, make sure your tractor has the hydraulic capacity required. Some planter manufacturers offer a PTO pump as an option.

6. Row shutoffs

One of the newer options for planters is swath control or row shutoff systems. These systems can reduce seed costs by preventing the planting of the same area twice. However, adding the required clutches and controls can be expensive. Blunier says to look for ways to capture most of the benefit with lower start-up costs. "For example, if you are using multiple hydraulic drives, you can opt for "half-width" disconnect that can cut overlaps in half or in thirds," he says. "If adding clutches, you can limit clutch costs by controlling two-, three- or four-row sections instead of every row."

7. Fertilizer application

Your planter evaluation also should include whether to apply starter or nitrogen with the planter. "If corn on corn is part of your cropping plan, or maybe down the road, odds are good that you could benefit from an at-planting nitrogen boost," Blunier says.

You should consider these components when choosing a fertilizer application system:

- Coulters or knives for starter and nitrogen placement.
- Tank size: Match fertilizer tank size to seed bin capacity to synchronize fills.
- Pump system: Be aware that ground drive planters that are also running a pump can transfer vibration to your meters.
- Other attachments: Row cleaners, downforce systems, parallel arms, and other modifications can limit the types of fertilizer systems available. Factor in these add-ons when choosing a fertilizer system.

8. Downforce

Downforce is needed to get the planter's double disc openers to the desired planter depth. Performance varies among the different downforce systems available, Blunier says. "For example, pneumatic systems provide responsive, consistent pressure and are easy to adjust," he says. "Spring systems can be less consistent in applying pressure. Some of the side spring options exert a more consistent force through a wider range of motion but may not apply enough force in certain field conditions."

Reduced inner diameter (RID) gauge wheel tires, designed to reduce sidewall compaction, can be effective on row units that have a seed boot or shoe to hold loose sidewall soil away from the seed. They also can work with standard double disc opener systems in damp soils but may lack the pressure needed in dry soils to hold the sidewall for maximum yield.

9. Row cleaner

Almost all cropping systems will benefit from planter row cleaners to manage residue, Blunier says. Row cleaners should move trash and debris out of the row by lightly brushing the ground. "If set too high, debris remains in the row," he says. "Set too low, trenching occurs which can move soil affecting seed placement and lowering the effectiveness of any soil-applied herbicide."

Your row cleaner choice will affect your choice of fertilizer systems and downforce requirements. Blunier recommends using floating row cleaners as opposed to pinned or fixed ones because they provide consistent performance without affecting downforce requirements.

10. Closing system

Finally, consider all the factory and aftermarket options for closing systems. “A good closing system will collapse the sidewalls and cover the seed, leaving little to no evidence of the trench being created while not moving the seed,” Blunier says. “Choose a system that is adaptable for different conditions throughout the season.”

New planting equipment for 2011

Great Plains Manufacturing

- Row-Pro down-pressure control system
- Swath control system
- YP-30 and YP-40 Yield-Pro planters
- Semi-mounted fertilizer carts
- 4-, 6-, and 8-row Yield Pro planters

John Deere’s SeedStar XP monitoring system

Kinze Manufacturing’s 3600 Twin-Line planter with Air Seed Delivery (ASD)

Schaffert Manufacturing

- Zipper closing wheel
- IH fertilizer disc

Raven Industries’ OmniRow planter control system

Precision Planting

- CleanSweep row cleaner adjustment
- WaveVision seed sensor

Ag Focus’s Planter Pro planter attachment

CFC Distributors’ Captive Rim gauge wheel assembly

Central City Scale M3060 Touchscreen Indicator

Trimble’s Field IQ

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