

May 8, 2020  
Spring Carpet

The old farmer walked into the store and said, “I would like to carpet my field. What colors do you have available?”

The clerk gazed out the window at the colorful spring growth occurring in the untilled farm fields and stated, “We have purple, yellow and white.”

“Those sound like some colorful options”, said the farmer. “Tell me more.”

The clerk went on to explain, “Purple dead nettle will give quite an interesting look to your field. The upper leaves of this foot-tall plant are purplish red in color and the flowers are purple to pinkish-purple. This imported plant will give you a beautiful look, but only temporarily, in late April before it goes to seed and dies away. Problem is most people say it is a weed.

Now, if you want to look at yellow, we can get you a more vibrant look that people will notice, with cressleaf groundsel. It blooms a little later than purple dead nettle and stands about 3 feet tall with 1-inch daisy like flowers. Stems are light green in color with noticeable red veins. It will also stay yellow longer into the spring before going to seed.”

“I thought that was mustard.” said the farmer.

“No, not at all,” replied the clerk. “Just because it is yellow, doesn’t mean it’s mustard. Cressleaf groundsel is in a different family with over five flower petals compared to mustard’s four. It is also native, but if you run livestock in the field it can be toxic.”

“I am not impressed with either of those short-lived choices,” the farmers said in a matter-of-fact manner. “What about the white?”

“Well,” the clerk drawled hesitantly. “Pennycress is just not that exciting to look at. Kind of a wimpy plant, but can be found in great numbers. Again, it’s here in the early spring and then it’s gone. By itself it can grow fairly robust, but in a crowded group, the size stays small. You can sure see it out there in a field but its color is just not striking. Then there is also an abundance of another white blooming plant this year, shepherds’ purse. Many of those white fields we are seeing are a combination of these two somewhat similar plants. They both have seed pods with indentations at the top. Kind of a heart shaped look.”

The farmer pondered a while and noted, “I don’t remember seeing these plants in large numbers when I was small.”

“They may have been around then,” replied the clerk “but our way of farming has changed and it has given these plants a chance to increase in numbers. The use of less soil herbicides with long residuals and the adaptation of no-till planting have been positive for our environment but at the same time these plants, that may have been destroyed by fall tillage, are showing up.”

Then the clerk looked at the farmer, “What’s wrong with green? People like green lawns, trees, corn and bushes. You can seed that field to a fall cover crop of rye, wheat or clover. Maybe even ryegrass. In fact, crimson clover can get you a beautiful red color in the spring if you wait late enough. All at the same time you will be benefiting the organisms in the soil and trapping nitrogen that may have escaped into the ground water. In the spring, kill the cover crop and plant your green corn and soybeans. Next fall, before the plants have completely died, fly some of that cover crop seed over the top and by harvest a live green carpet will lie in your field.”

“A green carpet,” considered the farmer. “Something to block the yellow, purple and white weeds and do good things for the soil, like keeping it from eroding during the winter!” He told the clerk, “Put me down for an order late this summer.”

As the farmer left the store, he contemplated how the times have changed. As he thought about these new weeds that agriculture is facing he spied a sign in the store window “Help the Butterflies, Free Milkweed Seeds,” and his thoughts went immediately to his youth.

“Milkweed used to be thought of as quite the weed when I was young, but those days are now over.”