

5 GAME-CHANGING CROP SCOUTING TIPS

WHAT YOU DON'T SEE IS COSTING YOU 5 GAME-CHANGING CROP SCOUTING TIPS

You check your yield monitor at harvest, but have you ever wondered where those missing bushels went? The truth is, by the time you see your final yield, the real damage has already been done. The key to bigger profits isn't just in the numbers—it's in understanding WHY the yield ended up where it did. And once the combine rolls through it, most of that evidence is gone.

Here are five simple ways to scout smarter and discover what's really happening in your fields.

1. The Flag Test – Are Your Plants Set Up for Success?

What if you could see yield loss happening from day one? Uneven emergence is an invisible yield thief, and most farmers don't realize how much it costs them.

Try this:

- When your corn or soybeans start emerging, mark them with flags—Day 1 gets one color, Day 2 another, and so on.
- Stand back and look at the pattern. The plants that emerge even 12 hours late are already behind and may never catch up.
- The question is—why? Could it be residue, planting depth, or soil conditions? Find the issue now, and next season, you'll see the difference.

2. The Soil Test You're Not Doing – What's Really Available to Your Plants?

A typical soil test gives you an estimate of what's in your soil—but what if it's not telling the whole story? A Total Nutrient Digestion (TND) test digs deeper, showing not only what is available to the plant right now, but what is the total amount of those nutrients.

Soils have a stockpile of nutrients locked up, unavailable to the plant. Most soil tests give you the available number (what is in the glass, available to the plant). Some will give you the next level (P2 for instance, which is like what is in the pitcher to refill the glass). But what is in the well (to refill the pitcher)? This test will give you both the levels in the glass and the well.

Seeing what percentage is plant available can tell you a lot about your soil microbial levels.

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3. What Tillers and Brace Roots Reveal About Your Crop's Health

Your crop is constantly giving you clues about what's working and what's not—you just need to know where to look.

Here's something to check:

- If your corn has tillers (extra stalks at the base), it's a sign of a happy, well-fed plant. The plant will shut them down and remobilize those nutrients if it reaches a point where it isn't accessing enough through the roots. Monitoring when this occurs will give you significant insight.
- Brace roots tell another story. If they're aggressively growing above ground, your plants are struggling to find everything they need through the nodal root system. Something is inhibiting the plants' normal root system and it is costing you yield. Monitor when they occur and see item 4.

Next time you're in the field, take a closer look. The signs are there if you know where to find them.

4. Dig Deeper – What's Happening Underground?

Above-ground growth is only half the story—what's happening beneath the surface is even more important. If you're not digging, you're guessing.

Grab a shovel and take a look:

- Are the roots deep and spreading, or are they shallow and restricted?
- Does the soil crumble easily, or is it compacted and hard?
- Is moisture getting where it needs to go?

If you want to unlock your soil's full potential, start by seeing what's really going on beneath your feet.

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5. The Late-Season Ear Check – What's Your Final Yield Potential?

By the time harvest rolls around, your crop has already told you how well your management plan worked—but are you listening?

Here's what to do before you pull out the combine:

- Walk your fields and count how many plants actually made it to the end of the season.
- Check the ears— As you are doing this count, keep track of how many plants fail to put on an ear, or have small, deficient ears. Use this to calculate how many effective ears you are harvesting compared to the population you planted. This can be eye opening.
- If you're seeing issues, the question is why? Was it planting conditions or weather through the season? This can yield clues of places to watch. And sometimes variables in hybrids can show up here.

Understanding these patterns now will help you make better decisions for next season.

Ready to Take a Closer Look at Your Fields?

Most yield loss happens long before harvest. A 5% increase in yield can be significant, and these clues can easily add up to that. While you may not always be able to fix it in the current year, you will have insight into how to avoid them in the future.

If you're ready to start scouting smarter and farming differently, let's talk.

Want more real-world strategies to maximize profitability? Join Big Picture Ag, where forward-thinking farmers test, share, and learn what really moves the needle.

Get more insights delivered to your inbox—sign up now!



TESTIMONIAL

"I never knew how much uneven stand establishment and early season weather was hurting me, until we started doing the Late Season Ear Assessments together. Even though I have very good kernel weights, the variability in ear size and kernel counts are costing me the most.

Focusing on things I can do to help my crop through early season stresses is key now."

- ADAM W. MISSOURI



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"Every time Mark comes to my farm it's like another science experiment, that's why I go to the field with him!"

- JEFF B. - NEBRASKA



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GET IN TOUCH

Yes, I want to increase my yield, lower inputs and increase profits. Let's talk.

Reach out to Mark now here:

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