

## 542 Seager Wheeler

#RealisticRegenAg | A chance discovery in a used bookstore in Winnipeg introduced me to Seager Wheeler. He shared similarities with many settlers who arrived in the Canadian Prairies during the late 19th century, but he stood out above others as Western Canada's Wheat King, gaining international recognition. What set him apart even more was the fact that he documented his experiences in a book. I stumbled upon a copy of "Profitable Grain Growing," dating back to the first printing in 1919. Join me in this episode as I delve into his life, his methods, and how you can access the entire book online if you're interested.

Welcome to Plants Dig Soil, a podcast about #RealisticRegenAg. I'm your host, Scott Gillespie, and I'm an agronomist from the western Canadian prairies specializing in climate-smart agriculture. I discuss scientifically proven practices that benefit the planet and, just as importantly, farmers' economic sustainability. Be sure to visit my website, [www.plantsdigsoil.com](http://www.plantsdigsoil.com), for resources and information about the services I offer.

Transcript is available:

<https://www.plantsdigsoil.com/podcast/seager-wheeler>

Free copy of the book:

<https://archive.org/details/cu31924003320680/page/n7/mode/2up>

Also search "Seager Wheeler Profitable Grain Growing" on your favourite book app or bookstore. It's been reprinted by many publishers of late.

Realistic Regen Ag Channel (WhatsApp):

<https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029VaBofw37NoZxtgHSRI3S>

My consulting packages:

<https://www.plantsdigsoil.com/pricing/#consulting>

My funding service offerings:

<https://www.plantsdigsoil.com/pricing/#paperwork>

SCAP overview: <https://youtu.be/0icitHJR2lk>

SCAP program details <https://www.alberta.ca/sustainable-cap.aspx>

My course: Profitable From the Start: Cover Crops for the Prairies:

<https://plantsdigsoil.thinkific.com/courses/cover-crops-prairies>

Newsletter signup:

<https://mailchi.mp/plantsdigsoil/newsletter>

<https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/6944029544697802752>

Email: [scott@plantsdigsoil.com](mailto:scott@plantsdigsoil.com)

X (aka Twitter) (Scott): <https://twitter.com/scottcgillespie>

X (aka Twitter) (Company): <https://twitter.com/PlantsDigSoil>

LinkedIn (Scott): <https://www.linkedin.com/in/scottcgillespie/>

LinkedIn (Company): <https://www.linkedin.com/company/plants-dig-soil>

YouTube: (Company): <https://www.youtube.com/@scottcgillespie>

Podcast Subscription Apps: <https://podcasters.spotify.com/pod/show/scottcgillespie>

So, let's start at the beginning. Just like my discovery of the book, chance encounters played a significant role in Seager's life. Interestingly, these chance encounters seem to be woven into the fabric of many of our lives. He faced a setback when he was deemed an inch too short in height and an inch too small in girth for Queen Victoria's Navy. This twist of fate redirected him towards the Canadian Prairies, where one of his uncles had ventured. The uncle had seized the opportunity to claim land in exchange for the promise of making it arable. The appeal of owning your own piece of land, especially a substantial one, was extraordinary at a time when most people were either tenant farmers or herders; their families having lacking ownership for generations.

Embarking on this opportunity came at a significant cost—severing ties with your family and ancestral homeland. The journey across the ocean was often a one-way ticket, with no possibility of reunion. Looking for a life of adventure, Seager responded to his uncle's call for available land in the Canadian Prairies. Despite longing for a life at sea, he found himself amidst the sea of prairie grasses and expansive landscapes. While his early farming endeavors were unremarkable, it was the lessons learned through years of tedious work that elevated him to legendary status.

One of the most tedious tasks he undertook was individually sorting seeds throughout the winter. Recognizing that the best wheat sprouted from the best seed, Seager's commitment to perfection was unparalleled. In contrast to today's abundance of high-quality seeds with over 95% germination and 95% vigor, he wasn't content with just planting what he had. Lacking any type of seed cleaning equipment, Seager's only option was to hand-sort the seeds, a process that might have served as a way to pass the long, cold winters on the Prairies.

In my previous book review, I explored the farming practices of Buffalo Bird Woman, one of the last indigenous farmers on the plains of the United States. Interestingly, both Seager and Buffalo Bird Woman shared a meticulous approach to seed preservation. In her case, she was adamant about ensuring a two-year supply in case of adverse weather conditions.

They also held similar philosophies when it came to land preparation. While Seager, equipped with horses and iron tools, worked on a larger scale, both believed in thoroughly working the land a year in advance. This involved breaking down the prairie grass, ensuring its complete decomposition, and removing root balls. Once the crops were planted, Seager was unwavering in his commitment to weeding, recognizing the long-term problems that neglecting this task could cause.

After a few years, both Seager and Buffalo Bird Woman observed a drop in productivity. However, their approaches diverged at this point. Buffalo Bird Woman, with access to new lands within her community or along the river, had the luxury of moving to fertile areas. On the other hand, Seager, working on dry,

arid lands away from rivers, had no such option. Instead, he plowed deeper into the soil, believing in its infinite fertility, albeit at the cost of eroding soil structure.

Seager advocated for pulverizing the soil into a fine powder, convinced that this enhanced plant accessibility to soil particles. While we now understand that this process released nutrients by breaking down ancient organic matter, Seager's contemporaries lacked this knowledge, instead believing that the plant physically took up the pieces of soil. Unfortunately, his soil management practices likely contributed to erosion and water infiltration problems by destroying soil aggregates.

It's tempting to criticize historical figures, but when Seager wrote his book, he was at the pinnacle of his career, with things working very well. The Dust Bowl of the 1930s, a decade away, wasn't part of his considerations. Unfortunately, I haven't uncovered his thoughts after that event.

The crucial lesson I gleaned from the book is this: just because something works doesn't necessarily mean it's correct. This philosophy finds a contemporary expression though the use of cover crops. A few years ago, claims circulated that with the right cover crops, a farmer could eliminate the need for fertilizer entirely. While this may hold true initially, the system crashes if nutrient export surpasses import.

I'll provide a link to a copy on Archive.org with the same cover and layout as mine, differing only in the copyright page listing the first and second printing. Since mine only lists the copyright, I believe it's from the first printing. If you have insights into historical book printing, please comment, message me on Spotify, or visit my website – [www.plantsdigsoil.com](http://www.plantsdigsoil.com) – and send a message through the contact page. You can also reach out via email, phone, or text. Until next time, take care. See you soon.