

In 1974 Ken Borchert got a call from his former football coach that changed his life. Athletics were not involved. Instead, the subject was all business. Coach knew a farmer near Powell, Wyo., who needed help, a man who might offer an opportunity in farming the young Borchert had hoped for.

"It was interesting," Borchert says, "mainly because I didn't know anything about producing grass seeds. I grew up on a farm east of there that produced hay, grain, and beans. Still, Paul Etheridge hired me and I began learning the seed business from the bottom up."

The lessons came fast. That first year they built a seed plant and quit hauling the harvest to Billings, Mont., for cleaning. Four years later Etheridge basically retired to care for his wife, and Borchert agreed to a 50/50 share arrangement. In 1982 they refined that agreement and Borchert took over all responsibilities for production, sales, and marketing in return for a 2/3 share. He also began to define his niche in the world of seed.

Expansion. "I went from growing two or three varieties to about a dozen," Borchert says. "The more difficult a variety is to raise, the more profitable it is, so I honed in on a few of those. Garrison Meadow foxtail, for example, is kind of difficult to raise. It doesn't produce much seed, but there's always a market. So with these new varieties, I achieved diversity.

"Then in the 1990s the CRP created a huge demand for all seeds really, even ones I didn't grow. CRP demand took the whole market up, which created a real roller coaster. Great years were followed by over-production and tough years, that were followed by more great years.

"Now we are back into sur-

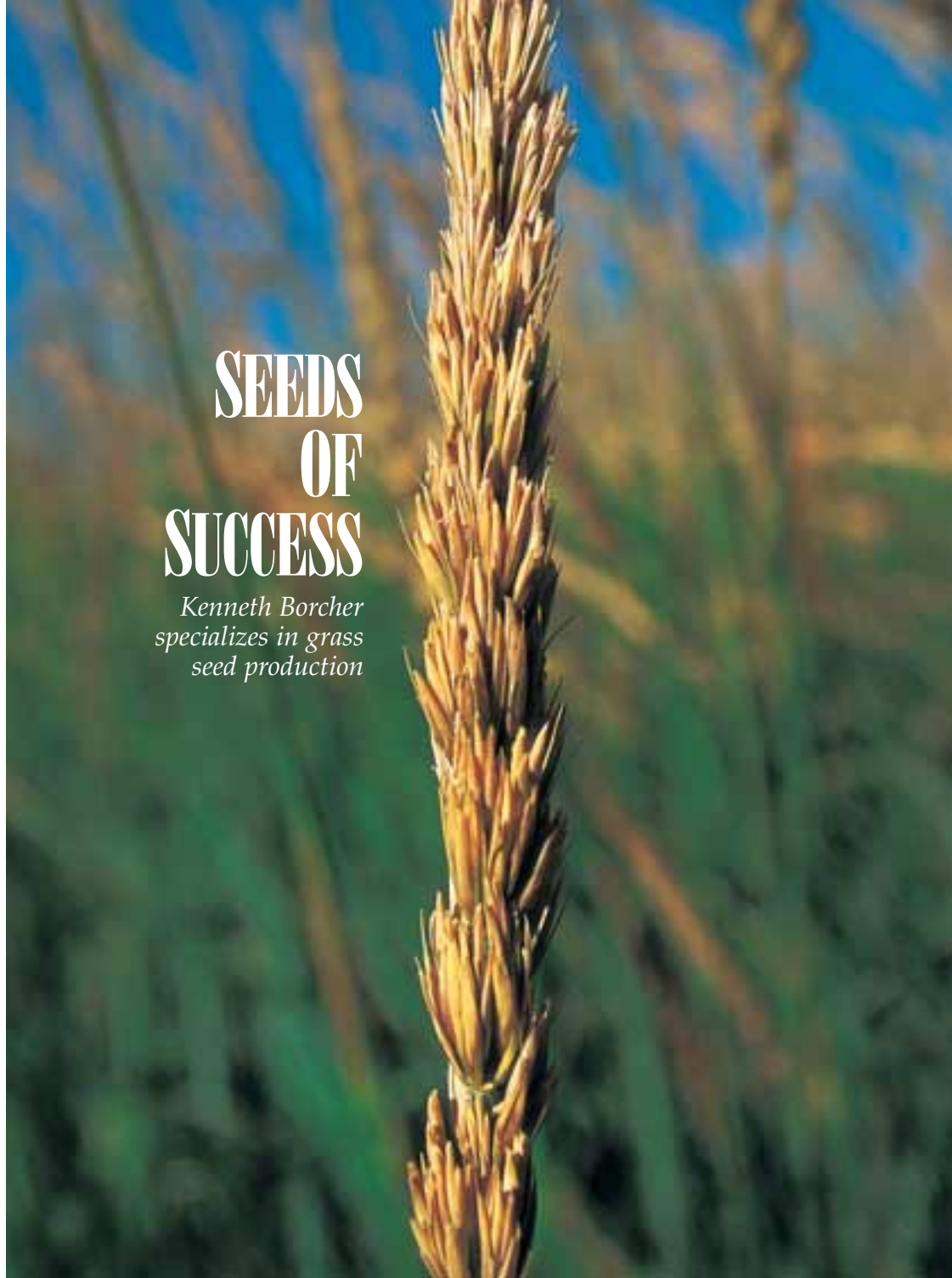
SEEDS OF SUCCESS

*Kenneth Borchert
specializes in grass
seed production*

Above: Basin wild rye is an important crop that provides income from seed, baled straw, and grazing.

Right: Ken Borchert, who farms near Powell, Wyo., grows some 20 varieties of exotic grasses.

pluses, but I've learned to live with a market that reacts purely to supply and demand. I have five other growers producing seed for me now, which expanded my offerings. But you never really know what to plant next. I have about 15 companies that are reliable buyers, but with





Left: Blue grama, a popular drought-resistant variety, is often used in dry-land mine and highway reclamation.



through. It is used to stabilize dunes, and when established, it is long-lived, very tough, and still palatable for wildlife.

A common grass Borchers markets is blue grama, which is a dryland, warm-season grass commonly used in mine and highway reclamation that is rapidly gaining favor as a turf-grass in dry climates.

While this diversity provides a measure of security, the challenges, in both production and marketing, are many.

"I clean about 300,000 pounds of seeds each year," Borchers says. "Some varieties produce 300 pounds per acre, and others produce over 1,200 pounds per acre. We also have two plantings. Natives are planted in the fall, while pasture grasses are planted in spring."

Crop challenge. "As far as production goes, weeds are a supreme challenge. Noxious weeds prevent a sale, so we use herbicides, cultivate mechanically, hand-rogue when we have to, and remove those weeds from the field in bags. My goal is to get a perfect stand, where there just isn't any room for weeds. I particularly like those varieties that send out rhizomes and continually thicken."

Borchers's other main challenge is managing the inherently volatile price swings that are a constant plague on pure supply-and-demand markets.

"I have some market power with some varieties in some

years," he says, "but generally prices are industry driven. If someone is paying \$2 per pound, word gets around and a price gets established. It's pure free enterprise. I rely on trustworthy buyers, then make decisions. I deal with about 15 buyers from the east coast to Canada, and I can say that overall the seed business is very honest and very forthright. There are very few sour deals."

Volatile markets. "However, that doesn't change the nature of the business," Borchers adds. "I've had seed fall from \$6 per pound to \$1.50 in the blink of an eye. On the other hand, I've seen the Bureau of Land Management step in and order more seed than is out there."

"So that's the real challenge. How do you handle such volatility? My thought after 25 years in the business is that if prices plummet, you either sell the seed quickly or hold on until it recovers. Warehousing is a limiting factor, but we have a 10-year shelf life due to low humidity."

Despite, or perhaps because of this volatility, Borchers has learned to diversify in other ways. The best example is a three-income stream on many of his crop acres.

After harvest, for example, the straw that is left behind still contains enough protein to make decent feed for horses, buffalo, or cattle. Borchers sells about 300 tons of palatable straw each year for around \$60 per ton. When the grass crops begin to regrow, 70 horses from a dude ranch move in to winter on his fields for \$20 per head per month.

"It's only possible to do this because of a perfect location," Borchers says. "Our climate is ideal, with lots of sun, low humidity, and very few weather events that damage crops. Our irrigation water comes from mountain snowpack, and even in dry years we've had enough water. Almost all Wyoming seed production happens in this basin." /Dale McDonald



Top: Crested wheatgrass is an exotic grass that Ken Borchers markets for forage and erosion control.

Above: Warehousing is important. When prices plummet, Borchers has learned to hold on to his inventory.

all the uncertainties in the marketplace, I've learned to be a good listener."

Today, Borchers oversees production of nearly 20 different varieties ranging from exotics like Volga Mammoth wild rye to niche fescues, foxtails, and several wheatgrasses.

His selections of Basin wild ryes, for example, are used in high mountain valleys where snowpacks are heavy. They grow tall and provide good forage for wildlife and cattle at calving.

Garrison Meadow foxtail is a pasture grass that can handle wet sites or irrigation, and has the ability to handle 30 days of standing water.

Another extremely tough niche grass is Volga Mammoth wild rye that can be covered a foot deep in sand and still come