Young farmers embrace innovation

Like many boys, Felipe Adroaldo Rampelotto Gatto grew up loving everything mechanical – cars, engines and machinery. His family’s farm in Itiquira, Mato Grosso, Brazil provided just the right place to kindle his passion for engineering. At the age of 23, Gatto has completed his studies in agricultural engineering, and now puts those skills to good use as the third generation of family farm managers.

With his technical background, Gatto has been instrumental in bringing new innovation to the farm. He has just developed a new storage system for the farm’s soybean and corn crops and is responsible for finding better cultivation practices and new types of machinery.

For example, he has brought a new system of crop rotation to the farm that increases soil organic matter.

“To my left is a corn field, which we use for pasture after cultivation. The rich organic compost from [the pasture] helps when we plant soybeans the following year. They emerge with a superior stand,” he says.

Gatto and other young, well-educated farmers like him are embracing new advances in Brazilian agriculture. His farm plants about 20% of their soybean crop to varieties developed through biotechnology. Especially important are herbicide resistant soybeans. “Since glyphosate effectively destroys various weeds without
affecting the soybean crop, we have over the past three years rotated small plots to reduce weed pressures,” says Gatto.

The farm also plants crops that incorporate a seed treatment. “Because of our climate, we have periods where insect pressures from borer beetles are very high, thus preventing plant emergence and decreasing our yield potential,” reports Gatto. “We use insecticide seed treatments, which work to promote plant emergence by keeping insects away from the roots.” Gatto believes without these types of technologies the whole process of farming “would be a lot more complicated”.

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As an engineer and a farmer, Gatto believes in products that are supported by extensive research. “We rely heavily on products that are well researched by the manufacturers and also on those who offer a measure of technical and agronomic support,” he says. He also believes that continual innovation by the plant science industry in the areas of new crop protection products and new seed varieties will help farmers adapt to changing farming conditions and changing markets.

“I believe that in agriculture you have to look at changes at a minimum every five years,” he says. “That way a farmer has a chance to learn about and understand how these new technologies work and how they will affect his operation and his bottom line.”

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As Gatto reflects over the three generations of farmers in his family, he concludes the biggest changes in farming are technological. “It is incredible how things have changed from manual to mechanised cultivation,” says Gatto. “Nowadays there is even automated equipment and machinery that does not require an operator,” something he considers for the future of his farm.

As Gatto reflects proudly over his passion for farming and his interest in technology, he wonders if his young daughter will continue on his heritage as a family of farmers. “I will do my best to keep her interested in farming and farm life,” he remarks. “We do this because we love what we do and we make every effort to encourage this love of the land and farming in our children. However, she will have to decide what she wants to do, and I will support her any way I can.”

Gatto is one of a new group of young, well-educated farmers that are rejoining their family farms in Brazil. His generation looks to agricultural advances from the plant science industry to keep their farms productive and sustainable so that their children too can experience the passion of farming on the Brazilian plains.