“If the neighbors aren’t talking about it, we must be doing something wrong.”

That statement seems to summarize Jeff Polenske’s approach to the constant cycle of learning and teaching for CCAs. Polenske, of Tilth Agronomy Group in Appleton, WI, was recently named the International Certified Crop Adviser (ICCA) of the Year by the American Society of Agronomy (ASA). This award recognizes CCAs who deliver exceptional customer service, are highly innovative, have shown that they are leaders in their fields, and have contributed substantially to the exchange of ideas and the transfer of agronomic knowledge within the agriculture industry. ASA recognizes the ICCA of the Year each year at its Annual Meeting. The award consists of hotel and travel expenses for two to the meeting, a $2,000 honorarium, a commemorative plaque, and a one-year membership in the ASA.

The numbers describe Polenske’s work: 29 years, 56 current clients, 50,000 acres, and numerous college interns he has mentored. But Polenske has another version. “Some people would call it a passion, and some would call it a disease,” he laughs. “The best way to describe it is as plant doctors, we diagnose, look for issues, and try to correct them in the field. We’re a jack-of-all-trades kind of person. We need to specialize in all fields and network with professionals that are in-depth in those areas.”

The mind and attitude of a teacher

Nominator Bryan Jensen, a University of Wisconsin-Madison integrated pest management specialist, calls out Polenske’s creative approach: “Jeff is a visual thinker and teacher. When he teaches something to a client, he uses visuals and descriptions to explain difficult things like soil chemistry and nutrient uptake curves. Jeff has the mind and attitude of a teacher. He has laid the foundation for creating the next generation of agronomists.”

Polenske began work with a degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and experience as an intern in a county extension office, scouting fields and providing reports. Crop consulting was just starting as a profession, and Polenske sought out the additional training. In 1991, he earned his Certified Professional Agronomist (CPAg) credential, and his career launched.

“Certification is where you’ve earned some credentials. You need CEUs to do your job correctly…. There’s a level of status that comes with the certification,” he says.

At times, Polenske says, the work also takes on an emotional feature.” Sometimes you’re more of a psychologist than an agronomist, talking people off the ledge when it hasn’t rained for three weeks. Humor helps people through when their livelihood is on the line. There’s nothing I take more pride in than to see some of my farmers succeed and do well.”

There have been plenty of changes along the way. “When I started, almost everyone had a moldboard plow, but now I don’t know if anyone uses them. That was a challenge—and then converting people to no-till. A number of farmers are those experimenters who want to try the new things and actually push us. That’s what makes this job fun. They know they have someone to help them make it work.”

Polenske has also worked with the more reluctant clients. “Some of the government programs come into play to help fund different approaches to try on farms. [The farmers] can have a cushion in case the gamble doesn’t work. Sometimes I might say, ‘Hey, Joe down the road is trying this. Why don’t we keep an eye on it?’ And all of a sudden they’re trying it.”