

COTTON King of Crops in Georgia

Visitors to Georgia often ask, “What is that fluffy white stuff growing in the fields along the highways?”

That’s cotton, one of the state’s leading row crops. Georgia’s widespread cotton industry encompasses farming, ginning, cottonseed, textile mill processing, warehousing and selling of cotton. The industry provides many jobs and contributes significantly to Georgia’s economy. Cotton has an interesting history in Georgia and continues to serve us in many surprising ways.

A Richly Textured History

For over 100 years, from the time cotton was first planted in Georgia in 1733, until the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, it was the most successfully grown commercial crop in the state. That’s because the drought-tolerant plants were ideally suited to the growing conditions of Georgia and because Americans loved their “homespun” fabric made from cotton. In addition, cotton was an important export, especially to the English textile mills.

A Massachusetts teacher, Eli Whitney, revolutionized the cotton industry when he invented the labor-saving cotton gin while visiting Georgia in 1793. He called it a “gin” --- short for engine, and he claimed it replaced the work of 50 people. The gin simplified the process of separating the seeds from the cotton fiber or lint. The invention was considered so significant to America’s economy that the patent issued to Whitney was signed by the President of the United States, George Washington!

Civil War Nearly Wiped Out Cotton; it Made a Comeback in 15 Years

The Civil War severely impaired cotton production in Georgia. When the war ended in 1865, the scramble was on to find the funds for seed, livestock, labor and equipment to begin production again. However, it didn’t take Georgians long; within fifteen years, the state reached its first, million-bale harvest of cotton.

For the second time in history, cotton fabric became America’s favorite. Part of cotton’s comeback popularity can be attributed to the demand for denim jeans, or levis,” which were created just prior to the war. Levi Strauss produced “levis” work clothes for miners during the 1849 to 1860 California Gold Rush.

Inventors Used Cotton to Produce Their Big Ideas

Inventors turned to cotton when searching for materials to produce their inventions.

- Thomas Edison lit up the country by using cotton filament for the light bulb;
- Samuel Morse communicated with people all over the world by insulating the telegraph with cotton;
- The Wright Brothers stretched cotton muslin over the wings of their airplanes that made the first sustained flights;
- Cotton was the magic cord for tires that put America on wheels and
- Cotton linters...the short fuzz on the seed...were an important source of cellulose, used to make smokeless gun powder.

Boll Weevils and Polyester

Of all the dreaded, destructive insects in North America, none was more feared in the cotton belt than the **boll weevil**. It first entered the U.S. from Mexico around 1892, and made its way across the U.S. to Georgia. The little grey beetle with its long snout fed on the newly-developed cotton boll, destroying its growth. In Georgia, the boll weevil was responsible for millions of dollars worth of damage. Historians believe the weevils’ destruction was one of the major causes of the economic depression in the South. Consequently, it is considered one of the reasons for mass migrations of laborers to Northern U.S. cities. By 1978, Georgia’s cotton production was at an all time low.

Cotton's destruction by the boll weevil and the onset of synthetic fibers, especially polyester...remember the leisure suit?...almost brought the cotton industry to its knees. But for the third time, the industry fought back. The Boll Weevil Eradication Program, begun in 1987, eliminated the pesky nemesis as an economically significant pest by 1994. No weevils have been found in Georgia since 2002, but a vigilant maintenance program is in place to guard against its return.

The Third is a Charm

English Proverb, 1721

For the third time in history, the demand for cotton products, especially denim and other cotton clothing and household goods, have returned cotton to the status of most popular American fabric. National and world cotton consumption is increasing. In addition, overseas sales of yarn, denim and other cotton value-added products are in the billions of dollars and rising.

Food and Fiber...100% Usable!

All parts of the cotton plant are used. After harvest, lint is separated from the seed and baled for use in textiles. Cottonseed is crushed to make oil used in shortening; margarine; cooking oil; salad dressing and snack foods. Linters, the short fuzz left on the cottonseed hull after the ginning process, contain cellulose. Cellulose is used to make ice cream; paper currency, and other fine paper products; films; plastics; mattress and auto cushion coverings. Cottonseed meal and hulls contain many beneficial nutrients and are used to feed livestock. The remaining crop residue left in the field after harvest (stalks and leaves) are plowed under to enrich the soil. Nothing is wasted.

Cotton is in Harmony with the Environment

Because of the Boll Weevil Eradication Program, cotton growers use dramatically fewer pesticides than in the past and they've adopted tillage practices to minimize soil erosion. Cotton takes few nutrients from the soil because it is grown primarily for the fiber found in the boll part of the plant, and as noted before, the stems and leaves are plowed back into the soil. Even the meal produced from cottonseed as feed for livestock finds its way back to the soil as fertilizer. And finally, cotton's deep-rooting pattern allows it to very efficiently utilize the moisture in the soil. This makes it possible to produce top yields with half the water required by many other crops. Cotton truly is in harmony with the environment.

GEORGIA COTTON FACTS

- Have you ever wondered how much cotton it takes to make these everyday items? 1 pair of jeans - 1.5 pounds (24 ounces); 1 man's shirt - .6 pounds (10 ounces); 1 adult t-shirt - .5 pounds (8 ounces); 1 cloth diaper - .15 pounds (2.5 ounces); and 1 bath towel - .6 pounds (10 ounces).
- Georgia's cotton industry, including farms, gins, merchants, warehouses, cottonseed and manufacturers, makes a major contribution to Georgia's economy.
- Sometimes called "White Gold," cotton is the most widely grown row crop in Georgia.
- Records show the most cotton acres planted in Georgia were in 1914, with 5.15 million. Today Georgia typically plants more than 1 million acres per year.
- The cotton gin was invented by Eli Whitney in 1793, while he was visiting a Georgia plantation. Its comb-like mechanism replaced the labor of 50 workers.
- The "Cotton States and International Exposition of 1895," was advertised as the grandest fair ever held in the "New South" and was held in Piedmont Park, Atlanta, Georgia. It showcased the economic recovery of the South (in which cotton played a large role). It also served as a way to highlight the region's natural resources and lure northern investors. Atlanta observed the centennial of the Exposition in 1995, with exhibits, lectures and special events.
- Cotton was first planted in the Trustees' Garden, Savannah, in 1733, with seed from England. Though cotton was grown in other colonies, Florida and Virginia, Georgia was the first to produce it for commercial purposes in 1778.
- The first cotton mill, the Bolton Factory, was built in 1811, near Washington, Georgia.

- The Boll Weevil Eradication Program was implemented in Georgia in 1987, and no weevils have been found here since 2002! It has lowered production costs, provided the conditions for an increased yield of cotton per acre and dramatically reduced the use of pesticides in Georgia's cotton production.
- Approximately 15 percent of cotton producers' income is attributed to cottonseed.
- For each 100 pounds of fiber produced by the cotton plant, about 162 pounds of cottonseed is produced. Approximately 5 percent of the total seed crop is reserved for planting. The remainder is used for feeding as whole seeds or as raw material for the cottonseed processing industry.
- 1 ton of cottonseed yields about 320 pounds of cottonseed oil. The U.S. snack food industry uses about 40 percent of the cottonseed oil produced.

The following can be produced from one bale of cotton:

4,321 socks or 249 bed sheets or 690 bath towels or 3,085 diapers or 21,960 handkerchiefs or 215 pairs of jeans.

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