

Peanut Blog

An ounce of information



A South Carolina harvest

Millions of peanuts fill a massive storage building at a buying point. Buying points aid peanut farmers and serve as a storage point after harvest, effectively working as a middleman between farmers and commercial shellers.

During October, the backroads of South Carolina come alive with crop fields seemingly stretching to infinity. Traveling over ancient sand dunes within the fall line 40 miles southeast of Columbia, I see the terrain flatten as I approach the upper coastal plains. Resembling a prairie, the views are of soybean, cotton, and peanut fields ready for harvesting. Today, I am not traveling for the cotton harvest but for a harvest I have never experienced before — the peanut harvest.

A tropical plant originating from South America, peanuts are a unique crop due to never seeing the fruit above ground until harvest time. Classified as a legume, peanuts grown in South Carolina represent 4 to 5 percent of the national harvest. Orangeburg County has the highest harvest yield in the state. The three most popular peanuts grown in South Carolina are the Virginia, Runner, and Valencia. I prefer the Virginia peanut — it is considered a gourmet peanut with excellent taste and, when roasted, crunchiness. Runner peanuts, often used in the production of peanut butter, are a high yield crop. Boiled peanut vendors alongside South Carolina highways prefer the sweetness of the Valencia peanut.

The peanut field, hundreds of acres in size, is covered by a vibrant green carpet of planted peanuts. Planted in early May, the crop takes around 150 days to grow and mature. Now late October, the crop is ready to harvest; however, the schedule and timelines revolve around the recent weather forecast. Workers sample several plants to examine the fruit inside, determining the peanuts are ripe. Once ready, farming implements take over. A large tractor pulls the “turning” tool, a plow that cuts the peanut plant away from the taproot. The tool also “shakes” the peanut shell free of soil and turns the peanut pod face up to dry in the sun for three to five days. Turned samples taken a few days later give a farmer the “go-ahead” to combine the harvest, once the drying peanut’s moisture level reaches a certain level.

Following the peanut turning, we depart for another field turned several days prior, where the peanut combine is the star. The job of the combine is to gather the turned peanut crop, separate the peanut pod from the stem, and remove trash from the process. Photographing several combines within this field made me realize how intense the harvest can become; rain can ruin the crop at this vulnerable stage. Time is valuable to the point where combines are met in the field by a storage vehicle the purpose of which is to gather the harvested peanuts being transported within the storage vehicle’s beds. Additional storage vehicles follow alongside the combines, ensuring the harvest never stops for even a moment.

At one point, several combines and storage vehicles make an artistic statement with their size and balances within the field. Above the field, a painterly stretch of late October cirrus clouds decorate the cobalt-blue sky. I realize in front of me is a reminder of those days when you’re glad to be alive. Taking a break from photographing the harvest, I return to Gill’s truck, where he is watching the workers and machinery in the field. I mention the abundance of cotton grown on neighboring fields, and he explains how rotating his cotton fields with peanuts enhances the next year’s cotton yield, due to the peanut crop increasing nitrogen within the soil.

We talk about the difficulties of being a farmer. Gill speaks of the concerns facing all farmers today — rising energy costs, expensive machinery, rising interest rates, weather related issues, and a market with falling prices due to global competition. Gill’s land contains many plots of cotton ready for harvest. He tells of a market where the price he receives for his cotton is well below his break-even costs. He says many of his fellow farmers are considering getting out of farming. Another peanut farmer I have had the opportunity to learn from is Monty Rast. Based in Cameron, Monty farms peanuts in Orangeburg and Calhoun counties. Monty has served on numerous agricultural boards within the peanut and cotton industry. He has served on the National Peanut Board and is part owner of Carolina Peanut Buying Point in Cameron. A graduate of The Citadel, Monty enjoys his family’s help with numerous aspects of farming.

“Farming is truly one of the grassroots industries of our country. It is a tangible profession in which everyone is able to take ownership,” Monty says. One of Monty’s sons-in-law told me about Monty’s remarkable ability to drive a straight line with the combine. Monty says a unique aspect of peanut farming compared to cotton is the strength of the peanut harvest. Peanuts are not publicly traded as a commodity, as are soybeans, corn, and cotton. Peanut farmers contract with commercial shellers, and the peanut is not subject to global market manipulation, allowing a stronger price for the harvest. Monty has tried numerous crops over the years, and peanuts have become his favorite crop to farm.

Both Monty and Gill provide their local peanut market with buying points. Buying points are facilities where local farmers deliver their peanut harvest to be weighed, cleaned, dried, and which serve as the “middleman” between farmers and commercial shellers. All peanut harvests produced in the United States must be inspected by the Federal-State Inspection Service at a registered buying point. Peanuts are constantly sampled to check for moisture content, foreign material, and the quality of the peanut kernel. These inspections validate the price and quality of the harvest.

Locally harvested peanuts arrive at a buying point in large trailers to go through the process of inspection and cleaning. Peanuts are then vacuumed via large tubes into the storage buildings. Buying points store local peanut harvests in cavernous storage buildings, measuring in five figure square footage numbers. During harvest, the storage buildings become filled with peanuts and are coated with peanut dust. Inside several storage facilities, I am amazed at the scale of the harvest yield. One storage building is filled to the ceiling with millions of peanuts. I ask the manager of the facility to stand in for a photo, giving scale to the amount of peanuts as he is dwarfed by the huge harvest.

Once a harvest has been inspected, dried, and cleaned for market, another sample is taken to ensure the peanut’s quality before they are loaded into a trailer, ready for delivery to a commercial sheller. During harvest peak, buying points resemble large scale trucking terminals with a daily average of 20 full size trailers delivering peanuts to a commercial sheller.

On my last trip to Cameron, Monty invited me to lunch at a local grill. Entering the grill, numerous residents of Cameron came up to Monty to give him handshakes and hugs and to show the latest pictures of their grandchildren. It is easy to see what a local farmer means to the Cameron community. I remember a quote I read several years ago when Monty said how proud he was that he was able to feed his family and community from his farm’s harvest. When farmers plant in spring, the crop is promising with expectations of a good harvest. Willing to do whatever possible to ensure a good crop, farmers protect their crop against disease and insects and hope nature’s fate for their crop will be positive. Will a farmer have a banner year, or a failed harvest — increasing the financial pressure on their farm’s existence?

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