

Tobacco

Tobacco has been an integral part of Georgia agriculture for more than 200 years. It established Georgia as a valuable exporting colony, rescued farmers from the boll weevil and has proven its dependability as a marketable crop by adding millions of dollars annually to state agricultural revenues.

Thomas Jefferson said Georgia would be an ideal place to grow tobacco as early as 1782. At the time he implied that the fertile soil and warm climate of our state would provide such superior growing conditions that Maryland and Virginia would be surpassed in tobacco production.

By the late 18th century, Georgia exported 176,732 pounds of tobacco. The gold leaf went to market over dirt roads to the Savannah river, near present-day Augusta. By 1791 Georgia ranked third among southern states in tobacco production.

In 1793, however, the development of the cotton gin caused tobacco production to decline. Farmers could not resist the temptation to plant the lucrative cotton crop which at the time brought much higher prices than tobacco.

Farmers still grew enough tobacco for their personal use and after the War Between the States it was frequently the tobacco crop, although small, that helped farms survive.

By the late 1800's tobacco was gaining popularity but did not regain its pre-cotton status until the arrival of the boll weevil in the early 1900's. With cotton crops devastated, farmers once again looked to tobacco. Also, there was a new market to supply. The introduction of the

blended cigarette in 1913 created increased demand for Georgia leaf.

The increased demand and improved technology enabled Georgia tobacco farmers to grow greater quantities of tobacco per acre.

In 1919, Georgia produced 11.6 million pounds of leaf on 23,800 acres with an average yield per acre of 488 pounds. By 1978, 125 million pounds were grown on 61,000 acres averaging 2,060 pounds per acre.

Several varieties of tobacco have been produced in Georgia. Warne, a heavy coarse variety was first grown but the thinner flue-cured tobacco replaced Warne around the early 1900's. Sumatra, a shade-grown tobacco used for cigar wrappers was a popular Georgia-grown leaf. By 1900 thousands of Georgia acres were covered with canvas tents that protected the plants from the direct rays of the sun and pounding rain.