

How its made

While a single cotton fiber is not very strong, when multiple curling fibers are straightened and twisted together, they form a strong, smooth thread that can be knitted or woven, as well as dyed. Ginned cotton is bound into large bales weighing approximately five hundred pounds each. These bales are classified according to quality and then sold.

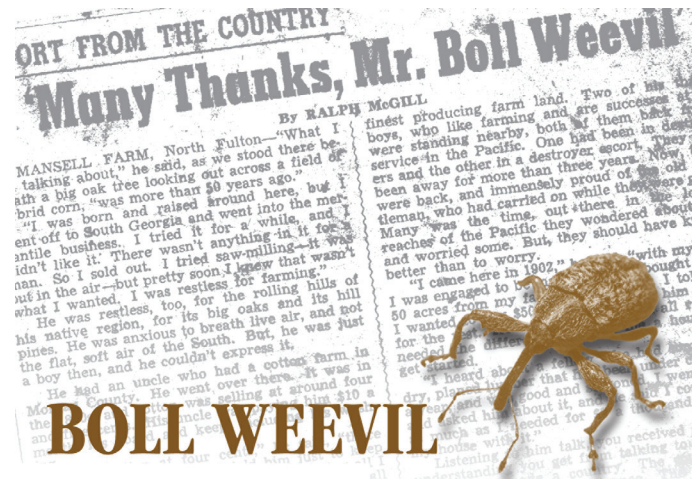


Cloth for apparel, household and industrial uses is manufactured from high grade cotton. It is somewhat flammable, especially lighter varieties which hold a lot of air. Some cotton is chemically treated to reduce flammability.



Many types are also blended with other natural fibers, such as linen, to add texture and strength to the fiber. Cotton can be woven or knitted. It can also be turned into flannel, corduroy, muslin, and a variety of other fabrics. It can be said to be "the fabric of our lives".

Lesser grade, or linters (short, fuzzy fiber left on the seed after ginning) is used in the chemical industry for the production of plastics, film, paper, explosives and sterile absorbent cotton. The seeds are crushed and used in the production of cottonseed oil and livestock feed.



BOLL WEEVIL

Cotton is subject to infestation, especially by the boll weevil, a little gray beetle with a long snout. The boll weevil feeds on newly developed bolls, destroying its growth. Many growers heavily douse the plant in pesticides that are harmful to human and animal health, as well as herbicides to eliminate the boll weevil. The plant is also sprayed with a defoliant that causes its leaves to fall off. This practice enables the farmer to have cleaner cotton to gin.

Cotton also has very large water requirements. In the late 20th century, there was a push for organic, sustainable cotton grown and harvested without use of pesticides and human exploitation. This cotton is significantly more expensive than conventionally farmed cotton and may not be practical for most consumers.

After harvest, the stalks and bare bolls are turned under to fertilize the soil in preparation for the spring planting making all parts of this interesting plant useful.



Photo by D. S. Walker



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Cotton...

Perhaps nothing has defined the economy and culture of the south more than cotton. From the struggles and challenges associated with it...to the products produced from it, and the economic impact generated by it... cotton takes its place as "King" among crops. It is interwoven with our country's history and played a significant role in defining the South.

North Carolina is ranked sixth nationally in the production of cotton, representing 5.7 percent of U. S. production. It once ranked as the second largest producer east of the Mississippi.

Today, the world uses more cotton than any other fiber, and cotton is a leading cash crop in the U.S. The annual average cotton crop accounts for 5 million tons of lint and 7.5 million tons of cotton seed. The gross dollar value of cotton lint and its extensive production, harvesting, and ginning provides countless jobs for mechanics, farm machinery dealers, crop consultants, processors and people in other support services.

Cotton is a major agricultural crop in North Carolina supplying a natural fiber harvested from the plant. It is one of the oldest fibers under human cultivation, with traces of cotton over 7,000 years old recovered from archaeological sites.

Cotton is also one of the most used natural fibers in existence today, with consumers from all classes and nations wearing and using a variety of applications. Thousands of acres globally are devoted to its production whether it be the new world type with longer smaller fibers, or the shorter and coarser old world varieties.



A member of the mallow plant family, cotton produces delicate lovely flowers. Other members of the mallow plant family include hollyhock and hibiscus, used to brighten gardens all over the world. Each spring the seeds are planted in state approved areas with suitable fertile soil and climate. Regulation is required to protect against boll weevil infestation. In late summer, the mature plant produces a bloom that changes from creamy white to dark pink and rarely last longer than two days. From this flower, a rose-bud shaped pod forms and the fiber and seeds develop inside. The fully developed boll ripens and splits to expose the fluffy white cotton. A field of white cotton creates the illusion of a snow fall in 90 degree temperatures.

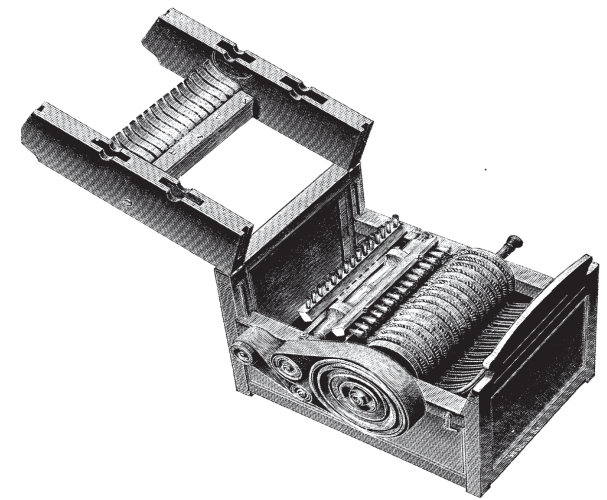


A cotton plant, with leaves that resemble those of a maple tree grows to a height of three to four feet. Careful cultivation, the right amount of rainfall, control of pest, and chemical defoliation are necessary to produce a bountiful harvest that begins in early October to mid-December.



Harvesting

Mechanical harvesters pull these fibers from the boll with finger-like projections. Larger trailer loads of raw cotton are transported to a gin, where the seeds are separated from the fiber. After harvesting, seeds are removed from the bolls with metal combs.



Cotton Gin

This process was extremely laborious until the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney, which quickly separates the seeds from the fiber and combs them for spinning.