



With facilities in Anguilla and Greenville, Delta Peanut, LLC, is one of Mississippi's first peanut businesses. Trey Heigle, right, is a partner in the company, which cleans, dries and stores Mississippi-grown peanuts before they are shipped to a Georgia processor.



Mississippi producers are showing that working for peanuts is not a bad thing.

The state produced the second highest per-acre peanut yield in the country in 2005 with between 1.7 and 1.8 tons grown per acre. Since 2001, Mississippi jumped from obscurity in peanut circles to No. 9 in the nation on the strength of about 17,000 acres of the crop. Peanut acreage is expected to increase about 10 percent this year.

Mike Howell, Mississippi State University Extension Service southeast district area agronomist, said the 2002 Farm Bill opened the door for the crop in Mississippi.

"When the quota system was eliminated, it became possible for a lot more farmers to grow peanuts," Howell said. "The interest really sparked in the southeast corner of the state, where a few farmers had already been growing peanuts for several years. Peanuts now are grown there, throughout the Delta and in the northeast part of the state."

Diseases can transfer between peanuts and soybeans, but peanuts make a good rotation crop for corn or cotton. Peanuts can be grown on any soil type, although they perform best on sandy soils. Heavy soils make harvest difficult for this belowground crop.

"We can find sandy spots in most counties in Mississippi," Howell said. "The southeast part of the state will probably remain the best part of the state for peanuts, but peanuts can be grown anywhere there is sandy soil, such as along rivers and creek bottoms."

PEANUTS

Gain Ground in Mississippi

**By Bonnie Coblenz
Photos by Robert Wells**

Howell said the state has high yields because it has low disease pressure.

"You have to rotate peanuts because of disease pressure," Howell said. "We're on new soils so we don't have the disease pressure now that other states face, but we probably will in five or six years."

Peanut harvest equipment is significantly less expensive than harvest equipment for corn or cotton, and peanut inputs match cotton's input cost of \$500 to \$600 an acre. With good per-acre yields and a minimum price of \$355 per ton, peanuts are as economically attractive as cotton grown on good land, Howell said.

George County in southeast Mississippi leads the state in peanut acreage with more than 2,000 acres in 2005 and 2006. Mike Steede, George County Extension director, said he expects no real change in peanut acreage in his county until a new Farm Bill changes farm policy again.

"Peanuts perform well in this area and do fairly well in a drought situation compared to other crops," Steede said.

Steve Tanner is a George County farmer who has found a place for peanuts in his farming operation.

"Peanuts work pretty well in our operation as a rotation crop. They are a nitrogen-fixing crop that saves us a little money on fertilizer because fertilizer has gone so high," he said. "It's one of the higher dollar cash crops right now, peanuts and cotton."

Another consideration for south Mississippi producers, Tanner added, is that "hurricanes don't blow them away."

Ken Hood, Extension agricultural economist, said peanuts' estimated value of production was \$7.83 million in 2006.

"I expect this to increase in 2007 if weather during the growing season is normal," Hood said. "Prices have held steady, but if speculation is correct about large tracts of Georgia peanut acreage moving to corn this year, we may benefit as buyers offer premiums over the loan rate."

Hood said total peanut acreage nationwide has steadily declined since 2002. Peanut stocks are down from 2006, and it appears that national peanut production will decline again in 2007.

A bill to establish a \$2.50 per ton checkoff on peanuts was passed by the Mississippi Legislature and signed into law by the governor in March.

Howell said the state's peanut growers' association will use the checkoff program to fund research and promotion of the crop in Mississippi.

"MSU has already done some peanut variety trials at several locations around the state and the checkoff will make more research possible," he said. "The growers will decide what types of research projects they want to fund through the checkoff program."

Howell said peanuts grown in the southeastern United States are of the highest quality in the world, and most Mississippi peanuts end up in candy or peanut butter or are packaged as snacks.



Marco Nicovich

In 2006, MSU entered the peanut retail market with 18-ounce cans of crunchy and smooth Bully's Peanut Butter, as well as 1-ounce foil packages and 12- and 60-ounce cans of Bully's Party Peanuts. Each of these products is available for purchase on campus in the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station Sales Store, also known as the MSU Cheese Store.

"We are offering the peanut products as a way to support the state's peanut industry and to make consumers aware that peanuts are now a Mississippi product, along with sweet potatoes, blueberries and other food crops," said Vance Watson, vice president of the MSU Division of Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine.