Cotton is more than "just peanuts" in peanut country

Take the Squires family farm near Alfalfa, OK, located in the middle of traditional peanut-growing country.

Brad and Barry Squires, along with their father, Carlos, have grown peanuts for decades. But diseases, such as sclerotinia blight, and weeds, like eclipta, and higher production costs have made peanut farming very expensive.

"We decided to try cotton for several reasons," Brad said, "Our family had not grown cotton since 1971. But in 2004, we harvested the first cotton crop I had ever farmed. This is our second crop in 2005 and we see it as a valuable money crop, first, and as a way to clean up a lot of our peanut land with disease and weed problems."

While the Squires used to grow many acres of peanuts, they have 60 acres in 2005. This year, they will harvest cotton on 20 different center pivot irrigation plots each containing 120 acres. Eight inches of irrigation water for the growing season plus 15 inches of rain has provided them with the potential for an outstanding crop, Brad believes.

"We averaged 2.6 bales to the acre in 2004," he said. "Since it was our first cotton crop, we made some mistakes. This year, we have refined our production practices. The OSU State Cotton Specialist, J. C. Banks, helped us a lot. We may be able to beat last year's yields if nothing happens between now and harvest. We had a good top crop last year. Today, most of the cotton is loaded with bolls all the way down the plant."

They will begin defoliating their cotton in a few days, Brad said.

Cotton planting got off to a good start for them this year. While they had to spray four times for thrips and had stinkbug damage on 200 acres of cotton, they did not have to replant any cotton.

Their cultural practices for growing cotton are similar to other farmers using center pivot irrigation, he said. They plow with a shank ripper, cutting into the soil from nine to 14 inches in a 36 inch strip. They apply fertilizer in these strips and then plant cotton.

Squires uses picker cotton varieties. They planted Stoneville 5599, DeltaPine 4444 and FiberMax 960 and 989. All of these varieties have stacked genes. They are Roundup Ready to help farmers combat weeds and have Bollgard to prevent diseases.

"Using stacked gene varieties is a tremendous help," Brad said. "It cuts down on a lot of the management costs historically found in growing cotton."
New cotton production methods also requires buying a lot of machinery the Squires did not have, Brad said. "We had to buy two new eight-row strippers, a spraying rig and a boll buggy."

Custom harvesting for their neighbors has helped offset the expense of new machinery, Brad said. "We have plans to harvest approximately 500 acres for other farmers this year. When we get through ginning at the Farmers Cooperative Gin at Carnegie, we hope we will see some top yields."

Some of their future plans will be to plant dryland cotton in rotation with wheat, he said.