

Producing Peanuts for the Fresh (Green/Boiling) Market¹

D. L. Wright and B. Tillman²

While the vast majority of peanuts grown in the United States are dried, shelled, and processed into roasted nuts, peanut butter, or used in candy or other products, many consumers enjoy boiled peanuts that are not dried before processing. Production of fresh market peanuts, also referred to as “green” or “boiling” peanuts, varies widely as to size of operation and cultural practices. Many people outside of the Deep South have not heard of boiled peanuts, and many that have, have not eaten them. It may take a few times of eating them before they get “hooked” on peanuts processed in this fashion and then prefer them above all other types of peanuts. A homeowner may grow a few plants in the garden for family use, or a small farmer may grow, harvest, and market a crop in the local area, while large commercial producers may provide peanuts to supermarkets, roadside stands, and food processors to can after the peanuts are boiled. Consumers of boiled peanuts generally prefer fresh green peanuts since they take less time to process in a salt water solution or in a pressure cooker than dry peanuts. However, dry or frozen peanuts are alternatives when fresh green peanuts are not available for boiling.

Florida is a major producer of fresh market peanuts because of its long growing season. Sandy soils are conducive to producing peanuts that have bright hulls, an important feature for most markets of in-shell peanuts. Peanuts grown

in soils with clay will have a reddish color to the shells and do not have the eye appeal of bright hulls of peanuts grown on sandy soils. Most of the commercial acreage of boiling peanuts is in central and north Florida, but peanuts are also planted for early spring harvest in warm areas of southern counties. Most of the northern and panhandle counties have farms that harvest various quantities of fresh market peanuts that are grown on contract. These farmers often plant peanuts over an extended period of time so that they can supply fresh boiling peanuts over several months.

Producing peanuts for the fresh market requires planning and facilities that do not apply to production for dry markets. Nor does conventional marketing apply to the fresh market—more labor will be required, and a packing shed and coolers will be needed for larger operations that do not ship green peanuts immediately after harvest. There is a lot more risk in growing fresh boiling peanuts since there is no commercial market (as there are for dried runner peanuts), and they have to be moved into the marketplace rapidly to ensure high quality.

There has been limited research on producing fresh market peanuts in Florida, so the following comments and suggestions are based to some extent on practices used for dry peanuts and on observations of practices used by producers of green peanuts. Because markets are highly variable and

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2. D. L. Wright, professor; and B. Tillman, associate professor; UF/IFAS North Florida Research and Education Center, Quincy, FL 32351.

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contracts can vary, production practices are also variable and a grower may devise practices that are unique to his operation.

Prior to the end of the quota system of the federal peanut program in 2002, peanuts harvested for the fresh market were not subject to quotas, but commercial acreage still had to be reported to the local USDA Farm Service Agency Office. Provisions for the current Farm Bill can be found by contacting the local FSA office. Production budgets can be found for dry peanuts at <http://www.caes.uga.edu/extension-outreach/commodities/peanuts/peanut-budgets.html>. These budgets do not calculate the special equipment and labor required for boiling peanuts, such as staggered planting and harvesting, grading lines, and hand picking.

Markets

The intended market should be identified as the first step before entering into fresh market peanut production. It may be possible to enter into contracts and agreements with buyers, but the potential grower should have assurance that his product will be acceptable and in demand at an agreed-upon price that will be profitable. Market windows and varieties are often of vital importance, and meeting quality standards of the buyer should be a part of any plan. A marketing plan and complete budgets should be developed before planting.

If the peanuts are to be sold to supermarkets or other establishments that will retail them as raw fresh peanuts where consumers may demand bright hulls with little or no visible damage, it may be necessary to use hand harvesting. If the initial buyer is going to boil and sell the peanuts to the consumer, then it may be possible to harvest with a conventional peanut combine. Bruising and damage to the hulls will occur with machine harvesting, which detracts from visual appearance and may cause them to be more perishable, consequently reducing shelf life. Bruising and hull damage may not be as important if the peanuts are boiled soon after harvest, as the hull may darken to some extent when boiled, and deterioration may not develop from the bruises. They may then be sold relatively soon at roadside stands, or they may be canned for later sale. Machine harvesting also results in more contamination with trash (attached peg stems, roots, vine parts, and other debris) and young, undeveloped pods. A picking line or conveyor belt with hand removal of undesirable material is often used to remove foreign material and damaged pods for both methods of harvest. If hand harvesting is planned, then considerably more labor will be required than for machine harvesting, but less labor should be needed at the

packing shed for the same volume of peanuts. Prices for hand-harvested peanuts may be higher than those that are machine harvested because of better visual appearance and shelf life.

Machines to specifically harvest green peanuts without causing extensive pod damage have been built and used to some extent, but have had only limited acceptance in Florida. It is possible that future machines will be faster and more efficient than hand picking, but may also result in limited pod damage. Such machines would have a positive impact on the industry. Standard peanut pickers are the main method of harvest with running them through a grading/washing line standard procedure.

After processing—which may include washing—the raw peanuts should be stored in a cooler until they are transferred to the buyer. For preservation of taste and less deterioration, the storage period should be as short as possible. Market windows and other marketing considerations may also affect the decision as to production plans. Some growers may often allow the peanuts to mature and go into the dried peanut market if demand is lower than expected.

Production Practices

Many of the production practices used for dry peanuts are identical to those used for fresh market peanuts, with harvest and post-harvest processing being major differences. Market windows are shorter and much more important for the perishable fresh market than for dry peanuts, and this calls for variations in planting dates and often areas of production. Certain types and varieties are popular for fresh market peanuts.

Varieties

While any peanut variety can be used for the fresh market, the Valencia and Virginia market types are favored by most consumers. Valencia varieties have a desirable flavor and three to four seeds per pod. Generally, the seed coat (testa) is red. Virginia varieties produce large seed and also have a desirable flavor. Growers like the Valencia type because they mature early and are easier to hand harvest because the pods are concentrated near the tap root. Virginia varieties have large kernels, and those that mature early are generally preferred. An extra-large peanut, known by various names that usually include the word “giant” in the name, such as African Giant, has also been grown successfully in Florida. These varieties are probably derived from a breeding line known as Jenkin’s Jumbo. Extra-large peanuts often have an above-average percentage of unfilled pods. Gypsum

applications are very important for proper pod filling of the extra-large peanuts, as well as for bright hulls.

Popular Valencia varieties include ‘New Mexico Valencia A’, ‘New Mexico Valencia C’, ‘McRan’, ‘Georgia Red’, and ‘Georgia Valencia’. A popular Virginia market-type variety for boiling has been ‘Gregory’, an early-maturing and large-seeded peanut. ‘Gregory’ has produced good yields in Florida tests and has been grown for the boiling market. ‘Gregory’ also has better tomato spotted wilt virus (TSWV) resistance than other Virginia varieties but is susceptible to leaf spots. ‘Bailey’ is another Virginia-type that has good yield potential and very good disease tolerance. ‘Bailey’ has smaller pods than ‘Gregory’ which may limit its popularity for boiling. Spain is a Virginia-type from University of Florida that is high oleic with very large pods. It has been tested for the boiling market, and preliminary results indicate that it has better tolerance to leaf spot than ‘Gregory’ and produced a high percentage of marketable pods.

Varieties grown for the dry market have considerable variation in tolerance to various diseases, particularly to TSWV. There have been a few isolated instances of TSWV damage to peanuts being grown for the fresh market. The best planting date to reduce TSWV is May 10–May 26 in north Florida, but many “green peanut” growers start earlier and plant later.

Traditionally, seed of the Valencia and Virginia varieties grown for the fresh market have not been as available as the seed of runner varieties. Thus potential growers should locate sources of the desired varieties well before the expected planting date, as well as having contracts for the harvested crop.

Planting Dates

As with many other perishable crops, price for fresh market peanuts tend to be higher in the early season when supplies are limited. In an effort to obtain higher prices, more risks are often taken by planting peanuts earlier than normal and/or in warmer locations in south Florida. Frost or freeze damage is a danger, but even extended periods of cool weather will substantially slow seed germination and growth of the plants and also delay peanut maturity. Reduced yields would be expected. In such situations, the grower must decide the level of risk that would be acceptable in exchange for the price that may be expected. A general recommendation is to plant peanuts only after the danger of frost has passed, and the maximum soil temperature at the planting depth has been above 65°F for

three or more consecutive days at a 4-inch depth. Wetter soils are generally cooler than more well-drained soils and are slower to warm up in the spring. Any irrigation that is needed should be applied a few days before planting so that the soil temperatures have an opportunity to recover. Rain or irrigation soon after planting under cool conditions can delay seed germination and early growth of peanuts.

Peanuts may be planted in mid- to late summer in an effort to extend the marketing season of fresh peanuts into the late fall and early winter. Similar risks as with early-planted peanuts can be expected for late-planted peanuts in that early cool weather in the fall will delay maturity and limit yields and quality. The peanuts should be planted early enough so that they would normally be mature before the first frost of the fall. It is also likely that insect and disease pressures will be high at planting in mid- to late summer. The grower must decide on how much risk would be acceptable for the price he expects to receive.

In areas where TSWV is common, early or late planting of peanuts for the dry market has resulted in greater losses to the disease than mid-season planting. Thus far TSWV has caused only isolated losses to peanuts being grown for the fresh market, but the disease has the potential to be devastating.

Planting

Use high-quality seed that has been tested and shown to have good germination and vigor. If good seed storage facilities are not available, wait until planting to take delivery of the seed. Use care in handling the seed as they are fragile and can be damaged by dropping or throwing bags of seed. Be sure that the planter does not damage the seed during planting, as germination will not be reduced.

Peanuts do not grow well in poorly-drained soils, so ditching for drainage may be needed in wetter locations. Rotation with a crop that is resistant to common pests of peanuts is highly desirable. Grass crops are usually excellent for use in crop rotations with peanuts. If possible, peanuts should not be grown on the same soil more than once every three years.

While little information is available on planting fresh market peanuts under strip or conservation tillage practices, it has been satisfactory for dry market peanuts. Strip or other conservation tillage programs can reduce land preparation time and the costs of growing peanuts. The incidence of TSWV has also been less under strip tillage. If peanuts are to be planted in the late winter or early spring in an effort

to gain an early market, it may be advisable to strip the rows off early so that soil temperatures will be higher in the bare soil part of the strip. If conventional tillage is used and the soil is subject to wind erosion, it is advisable to plant windbreaks of rye to prevent damage to the young plants from blowing sand.

Seed should be placed 2 inches apart in the row if single rows are used. Lower plant populations could result in more TSWV if the disease is common to the area. If twin rows are used, the same quantity of seed per acre as for single rows or seed planted 4 inches apart would be satisfactory. Twin rows often result in increased yields, but be sure harvesting procedures, including hand picking, are as efficient with twin rows as they are for single rows.

Planting depths are usually 1½–3 inches, with the greater depth being used on sandier soils that tend to dry quickly. The planter should firmly pack the soil around the seed to insure good contact and quick germination and emergence. To provide drainage, the top of the seed row should be level with, or slightly above, the row middle.

Fertilization

Follow fertilization recommendations based on results of a soil test. The general liming and fertilization recommendations for dry market peanuts should apply to fresh market peanuts. The target soil pH is 6.0, with lime being recommended when soil tests show the pH to be 5.8 or less. Unless there is a need to supply magnesium, calcic lime or calcium carbonate would be the preferred source of lime because of the importance of calcium to pod filling and hull brightness. If magnesium is needed, dolomite as the liming source would be the least expensive means of supplying magnesium, as well as increasing the soil pH.

If no soil test results are available, a pre-plant fertilizer application that contains about 30 pounds per acre of P_2O_5 and 80 pounds per acre of K_2O is suggested for sandy, well-drained soils. If the soil levels of phosphorus and potassium would be expected to be high because of fertilization of a previous crop, residual nutrients may be adequate for the peanuts and no direct fertilization would be required. While nitrogen fertilizer has seldom increased yields, many peanut farmers apply about 25 pounds of fertilizer nitrogen per acre to stimulate early growth. There is no research evidence that relates faster early growth to earlier maturity and harvest or higher yields. If legumes, such as peanuts, beggarweed, hairy indigo, cowpeas, or other plants in the cowpea inoculation group have not been grown recently on the land, an inoculant should be added to the seed or

seed furrow at planting. The inoculant supplies the bacteria that, through a symbiotic relationship with peanut roots, fix nitrogen needed by the peanut plant.

Boron should be a part of the fertilization program, especially for peanuts grown on sandy soils. About ½ pound of elemental boron should be applied in the pre-plant fertilizer or as a foliar spray by the time of first flowering. Manganese deficiency may occur if peanuts are grown on certain soils that have been limed to a pH of 6.2 or higher. Manganese deficiencies can be corrected with a foliar spray of manganese sulfate or other suitable material. While boron and manganese are more common, other micro-nutrient deficiencies may be noted under specific conditions, and can usually be corrected with the appropriate foliar spray.

As indicated above, calcium is a critical soil nutrient needed in peanut production, especially for pod filling and hull brightness. The calcium must be in the pegging and pod development zone for it to be effective because very little of the nutrient is translocated from the roots or other plant parts to the developing pods. To supply the needed calcium, gypsum should be applied at early bloom and before pegging. Dry, bagged gypsum may be banded (18-inch band) over the row at the rate of 250–400 pounds per acre for Valencia and runner varieties as well as for the large-seeded Virginia varieties. Large operators usually prefer to broadcast gypsum. If broadcast, and if the gypsum is a bulk source from electric power plants or phosphate mines, the rate should be at least double the banded rate. Also, bulk gypsum has a higher moisture content than bagged gypsum and requires increased rates to get the same rate of calcium in the pegging zone. Thus a ton of bulk gypsum that is broadcast should supply approximately the same amount of calcium in the pegging zone as 800 pounds per acre of bagged gypsum that is banded.

Pest Management

Practices used to prevent nematode (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ng016>), weed (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wg008>), disease (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/AG/AG41500.pdf>), and insect (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/in176>) losses in peanuts grown for the dry market should apply to fresh market peanuts. Because the visual appearance needed for fresh market peanut consumers may be critical, it may be important to prevent pod damage or blemishes due to soil pests and diseases. Lesion and root knot nematodes, wire worms, lesser corn stalk borers, and the various pod rot diseases can be sources of these blemishes. Cultural practices and pesticides as recommended in the various pest control guides should be followed for the management

of these pests. It is important to pay extra attention to the label instructions for the length of the pre-harvest interval for application of some pesticides because green peanuts are harvested earlier than they would be for the dry market.

Maturity

Peanuts bloom and peg over a long period of time (60-100 days after planting), and all pods do not mature at the same time. Peanuts grown for the fresh market are normally harvested at an earlier stage of maturity than peanuts grown for the dry market, but there are no standards for maturity determination. The peanut maturity profile or hull-scrape technique has been very useful to predict and determine optimum maturity of dry peanuts, but thus far it or a comparable system has not been adapted for green peanuts. The consumer demand (or what the grower perceives to be desirable maturity) influences the time of harvest. Generally, the more mature the peanut, the more flavor it will have, but it will also absorb less salt during boiling, will be harder to shell, and the kernels will be firm. The shell of more mature peanut pods is often not as bright as a less mature pod. Kernels that have not reached maturity will be soft and absorb more salt when boiled, which will enhance the flavor.

As indicated earlier, it would be difficult to always use days after planting as an absolute key to maturity, but it is still a useful criteria. The Valencia varieties mature faster than other varieties with many early spring-planted crops being ready to dig at about 90 days after planting. The same varieties planted at a more optimum period in the late spring may be ready to harvest in 75 days because of higher temperatures during the growing season. On the other hand, it would take well over a 110 days for maturity for the same varieties planted during the winter or when temperatures are frequently below 50°F. Virginia varieties will probably take about 20 days longer to mature than Valencia varieties grown under identical conditions.

Harvesting

Due to the supply and demand of various marketing windows, variable consumer demands, maturity at harvest, higher labor requirements, and needed facilities, harvesting of green peanuts requires extensive planning and preparation. When the time of harvest has been selected, the peanuts may be pulled by hand, dug with a shovel, or dug with a conventional peanut digger. The digging method will be determined by the size of the operation and the marketing procedures. Hand picking can begin immediately after digging, but digging should not be so far ahead of picking

that there is a risk of excessive drying, of rain (which may delay picking and darken the hulls), or of other delays that may affect the quality of the peanuts. If a conventional peanut combine is to be used to pick the peanuts, a few hours between digging and picking will allow the hulls to dry to some extent and not be bruised as badly by the combine.

After picking, the peanuts should be moved as soon as practical to the packing shed. Here they can be washed and passed over a conveyor belt or picking line so that trash, damaged pods, and other debris and foreign matter can be removed by workers. The cleaned peanuts can then be placed in crates or other containers and placed in a cooler until they are shipped or sold. Peanuts are at their highest quality at the time of digging, and then deteriorate until they are consumed, but this deterioration will be much slower with proper handling and refrigeration. Less time between digging and consumption means a more satisfied consumer.

Marketing

As indicated earlier, there are no standard marketing procedures or quality standards for fresh market peanuts, so the producer and his buyer have to develop a mutually satisfactory arrangement for determining price and quality. Maturity, moisture content, uniformity, damage, foreign matter, visual appearance, and many other factors may enter into a quality determination. Dry peanuts are sold by weight, the quality is determined by standardized federal grading procedures, and if properly stored, deterioration is relatively slow. Green peanuts are sold by volume, usually by the bushel, and are quite perishable. Thus the marketing procedures for green peanuts must be efficient and move the peanuts from the field to the consumer as quickly as possible.

Most green peanuts are sold on a volume basis, but the intermediate buyer may resell them on a weight basis, either raw or boiled. This often brings up the question of how many pounds are in a bushel of green peanuts. There are no standards for green peanuts, because the weight is affected by maturity, moisture content, and the size of the pods. For example, a bushel of Valencia peanuts will weigh more than a bushel of Virginia peanuts at equal maturity and moisture level, because of the smaller pods. Thus the most simple and accurate determination is to weigh a bushel, or portion thereof, of the peanuts in question. Longtime producers and buyers have developed agreements on the weight per bushel. For example, the weight of a bushel of Valencia peanuts is usually accepted to be 30–35 pounds.