

Louisiana Sugarcane Production

Planting – Prior to planting, the fallow ground is disked and precision graded to insure good drainage. The fallow operation occurs from spring through summer and prepares the seedbed for good germination. Furrows are opened on six foot wide rows and cane stalks are planted and covered. Each stalk consists of numerous joints, each with a bud which germinates and produces cane shoots. The planting season is from August through September. During the winter, the cane shoots are frozen back to the ground. In the spring the cane resprouts and begins to grow and tiller. Sugarcane is a grass and does not need to be replanted after every cutting. In Louisiana, three or four annual crops are harvested from each planting.



Cultivation and fertilization – The practice of working or stirring the top soil with disks or hoes pulled by tractors occurs each spring. This helps to control weeds, prepares the soil for fertilization and loosens the soil for cane roots to reach air and moisture. Essential plant nutrients are added to the soil to provide the cane plant with its requirements for maximum cane growth and sugar content.



Summer growth – Cane grows most rapidly during the summer months. During this period, the farmer cannot cultivate the crop but does control insects (sugarcane borer). With adequate moisture and typical summer temperatures, sugarcane can grow more than one inch per day during June, July and August.



Harvesting and transport – The Louisiana harvest season normally occurs from late September through early January. All cane is harvested mechanically either by a combine harvester or a soldier harvester. The combine harvester (seen in the photo) cuts the standing cane stalks into pieces (bils), shreds the leaves from the top of the stalk, and loads them directly into transport wagons. The soldier harvester, which cuts the stalks even with the ground, cuts off the tops and piles the stalks across the rows. Normally cane has about 15% trash (leaves) which is removed by burning. This allows for more efficient transportation and cleaner cane delivered to the raw sugar factory.

Cane that is cut with a soldier harvester burned the next day. Mechanical field loaders pick up the cane from the heaps and place the cane into transport wagons. These wagons deliver the cane directly to the factory or to a transloader station where the cane is transferred to highway trailers. After delivery to the sugar factory, the cane is weighed, sampled, and washed before being milled. In the factory, cane is crushed and the extracted juice boiled to produce raw sugar and molasses.