

The Sumatra trend did not last, however, as cost of production was considerably higher than growing flue-cured. Also, technology developed a reconstituted tobacco sheet that could replace the conventional cigar wrapper.

Flue-cured tobacco is greatly influenced by the soil in which it is grown. It thrives in sandy loamy soil. It is ready for harvest when the green begins to fade and the leaves become a yellowish-green, the tips cream-colored. As the leaves ripen, they are "primed," snapped off three to five at a time starting at the bottom of each plant. Since tobacco is primed about once a week, it takes farmers from four to six weeks to bring in an entire crop.

Many Georgia farmers still prime their crops by hand. Six to eight primers or "croppers" move down the rows of tobacco. The leaves are piled on trailers to be pulled by tractor to the curing barn. An acre of tobacco will require 300 to 400 man hours from planting to harvest.

Only recently has mechanized harvesting and curing replaced hand labor. One-man harvesters strip the leaves up to a certain height on the stalk and deposit them automatically in trailers.

Besides harvesting, curing also is done mechanically. Humidity, temperature and air circulation are more easily controlled in bulk barns than in conventional curing barns. The need for constant surveillance by the farmers is eliminated.

Curing takes place in three stages: yellowing, drying of the leaf and drying of the stem. In the yellowing stage, heat is maintained at around 90 to 100 degrees for 24 to 40 hours. The temperature is then raised to 135 to 140 degrees to dry the leaf and fix the color. This stage takes 30 to 36 hours. Finally the heat is raised to 160 to 165 degrees to dry the stem. Then ventilator openings in the barn walls are thrown wide open so the cured tobacco can absorb moisture from the atmosphere.