Schoolchildren and farmers alike have heard the story many times over. In the years following the Civil War, Southern growers struggled. Cotton, the region’s mainstay crop, was depleting the soil of nitrogen, upon which other plants depended.

Enter Dr. George Washington Carver. A passionate and innovative scientist, Carver convinced farmers to plant peanuts because of their soil regenerating properties. And when farmers grew more peanuts than they could easily sell, Dr. Carver discovered more than 300 new uses—creating a market that continues to expand today.

It’s no surprise that many historians credit Dr. Carver and peanuts with saving the South. But today, more than a century later, we face a new and bigger challenge: How we can produce enough food to meet the needs of a rapidly growing global population while paying attention to the impact on the planet.

Hunger poses the number one threat to health and kills more people than AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis combined. The problem is only expected to get worse, with the earth’s population projected to reach 9 billion by 2050, an increase of some 2 billion from today.

As nongovernmental organizations, political leaders, farmers and others search for answers, one question comes to mind: How can we produce enough food to meet the needs of a rapidly growing global population while paying attention to the impact on the planet.

Peanuts: The Sustainable Solution

In many ways, Dr. Carver was one of the earliest champions of “sustainability.” For organizations like the United Nations that are marshalling public will and resources to address hunger, feeding the world today must never be done at a cost to future inhabitants of our planet.

While there may be debates far and wide about what sustainability means, a widely accepted definition comes from the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, which says, “sustainability is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

According to the World Food Programme, 805 million people do not have access to enough food today.1


“Peanuts are more drought-tolerant than many other crops and other nut-producing crops,” Cox said. “Because water availability is expected to decrease over the next few decades, peanuts will likely become more of a staple than they already are. Drought tolerance is also an important factor in the context of water resources, which will be one of the biggest global challenges facing agriculture as an industry in my lifetime and beyond.”

Peanut yields, particularly in the South, are at an all-time high. Much of the credit goes to farmers themselves who—through state and national checkoff boards—have allocated millions of their own dollars to fund research and advances in production, including seed breeding.

Amber Pankonin, a registered dietitian whose views were shaped as the granddaughter of Nebraska farmers, favors a broad definition of sustainability that includes elements of farming and feeding.

“I think about sustainability in terms of agriculture, nutrition, food security, food waste and inspiring the next generation of farmers,” she said. “We have to think about producing more food with fewer resources. We have to make sure we’re preserving land and water while we grow more, nutritious food. There’s also the issue of food security: We need to think about the needs of a growing population, how we can improve nutrition through advanced breeding practices, and how we can prevent food waste. We also need to set up the next generation of farmers for success by giving them tools they need.”

Farmers in 2016 still count on peanuts’ nitrogen fixing properties. But the peanut sustainability story has only grown from there. Today, peanuts use significantly fewer inputs (water, land, etc.) and have less environmental impact than many other crops.

For a detailed study of peanuts’ water footprint, visit http://nationalpeanutboard.org/farmlife-sustainability/treading-lightly-the-water-footprint-of-peanuts/

Casey Cox is a sixth-generation peanut farmer from Georgia, who also understands the issues and opportunities from multiple sides. When she’s not farming, Cox manages the Flint River Partnership, which helps farmers in the region conserve soil and water resources.

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Pankonin, who toured Jeffrey and Stephanie Pope’s Virginia peanut farm with NPB at harvest last year, said she was impressed about how nearly every part of a peanut and plant is used. “They did not have a lot of waste in their crop. That’s another thing that makes it sustainable. I found that very interesting.”

4. According to the World Food Programme, 805 million people do not have access to enough food today.

Simply Peanuts: A Vital Food for the Earth’s Future

By Mark Dvorak

Feeding a burgeoning world population while following sustainable practices are two of the most serious issues of our times. How can peanuts provide a solution to the world’s pressing need for foods that meet both goals?
The Solution for Nutrition and Affordability
Given an oversupply of peanuts in the United States this year, the industry is looking at new ways to increase demand in both domestic and global markets. Fortunately, a giant threefold tailwind is blowing at peanuts’ back. Peanuts are nutritious and affordable— and consumers love how they taste.

At seven grams per serving, peanuts have more protein than any nut. And at two cents per gram, they are among the most affordable sources of protein of any food. 1 The fats in peanuts are primarily “good” (unsaturated) fats that researchers say we need for optimum health. 2 And overall, peanuts have more than 30 vitamins and minerals nut. 3 And at two cents per gram, they are among the most affordable and consumers love how they taste.

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In January 2016, the federal government released the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, used primarily for food policy decisions, but also intended to guide consumer choices. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans’ Advisory Committee Report gave a further lift to the case for peanuts: “A diet higher in plant-based foods, such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds, and lower in calories and animal-based foods, is more health-promoting and is associated with less environmental impact than diets rich in meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy.” 5

Pankonin notes, “The new guidelines are encouraging a shift in our habits to include an increase in the variety of protein foods we consume. That doesn’t mean giving up meats and poultry, but it does encourage more nuts and legumes.”

Dietitians like Pankonin will tell you that despite the messages we hear every day about eating better, taste still trumps nutrition when it comes to choosing what we put on our plates. Even though we say we want to eat better—and many of us are—we gravitate to foods we like.

“We’re not going to accept a healthy eating plan if it’s not sustainable to them—and fits within their budget and culture,” Pankonin added. “As a dietitian, you have to look at all those aspects when it comes to making recommendations.”

Peanuts have long been a global favorite and a central ingredient in many world cuisines—particularly in regions where food insecurity is greatest. While 94 percent of American homes have one or more jars of peanut butter in their pantry, we’re far from alone. 6 Peanuts were domesticated from wild varieties in South America thousands of years ago. Explorers took them back to Spain, and then on to Asia and Africa. Africans first introduced peanuts to North America in the 1700s. Today, peanuts are known as core ingredients in mole (Mexico), stews (Africa), sauces (Asia) and many other meals people enjoy and count on every day.

The Solution for Malnourishment
According to Feeding America, one in seven people in the U.S. struggle with food insecurity. The most requested item at American food banks: peanut butter.

Hunger, however, is exponentially more critical in other parts of the world—particularly developing countries. And that’s where the greatest evidence of peanuts’ power to feed a growing and starving population has unfolded.

In 1999, Dr. Andre Briend of the World Health Organization developed a Ready To Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF) by combining peanut paste with powdered milk, oil, sugar and vitamins. Since then, the product has revolutionized the treatment of severe malnutrition, encouraging rapid weight gain in the most-at-risk children.

In 2007, this peanut-based RUTF was endorsed as the standard of treatment worldwide for severe acute malnutrition by the World Health Organization (WHO) because of its particular efficacy at treating children 6 months to 2 years of age who are most vulnerable.

Today, instead of walking several miles to a clinic or doctor, children are fed at home by their mothers, using the ready-to-use food product. No water is needed, so the food stays bacteria free, and can be stored for several months without refrigeration, even at tropical temperatures.

Through a number of initiatives—including Peanut Butter for the Hungry, Peanut Proud and Project Peanut Butter—the American peanut industry directly supports the creation and supply of RUTF and other efforts to feed people in need here and around the globe.

Dr. Steve Brown, executive director of The Peanut Foundation, who has observed RUTFs in use in some of the most poverty-stricken areas on earth, said the peanut industry’s support makes a difference every day.

“The industry not only helps produce this amazing product, but it also helps impoverished countries produce it themselves, thereby providing a market for farmers and jobs for the unemployed.”

Dr. Steve Brown

As much as it would move more American peanuts, one country alone can’t provide all the peanuts needed to feed everyone in need for generations to come—particularly given the promise peanuts hold. Nor would such a practice be sustainable—environmentally or economically.

Think, for example, of Ghana, where women constitute more than 48 percent of the agricultural labor force. They are also the main purchasers of groundnuts and then use them to make paste and extract oil.

A program at the University of Georgia is working with local experts and farmers there to identify ways to prevent aflatoxin development and incent buyers to offer a premium for those groundnuts that pass a safety standard. The program is also training 40 pilot farmers on post-harvest aflatoxin prevention. The benefits of such knowledge-transfer accrue to U.S. growers, as well. American researchers are learning how to deal with new stressors—making our own production research and varieties that much more effective.

“Given the fact that the U.S. peanut industry works hard to export their product worldwide, you wouldn’t expect it to help other countries grow peanuts. In fact, we do just that—mainly through support of Peanut and Mycotoxin Innovation Lab projects in Africa and Haiti,” Brown explained.

“However, the flow of knowledge is a two-way street. Scientists from U.S. universities learn how the peanut plant performs in different environments and typically with greatly reduced inputs. Diseases and insects impacting peanut yields in these countries are the same ones we face in the U.S. and scientists gain insight about controlling these pests. Some of the diseases, insects and weeds encountered do not occur in the U.S. but will likely show up in the future. We will be ready for them,” Brown added.

The Solution for Today and Tomorrow
From the earliest days of peanuts circling the globe, through the times of Dr. Carver to today, peanuts have always had a great story to tell. But industry leaders like Jeff Johnson, president of Birdsong Peanuts, are seeing an even greater opportunity in the decades to come. And, as evangelists for peanuts, they’re eager to help the story spread.

“Peanuts have always been known as nutritious and are enjoyed worldwide. They are already saving countless lives in Africa. The fact they are affordable, widely available and sustainable will make them even more essential in the global fight against hunger.”