

By Charles Johnson

Hybrid, for real

*Part Acala, part Pima,
California's new hybrid cotton
makes a mark*

For years, researchers teased us with talk of hybrid cotton, promising higher yields and working the same wonders hybrids did for corn growers.

But hybrid cotton proved difficult indeed to commercialize. Hybrid seed production was uneconomical. It seemed all that greenhouse and plot talk about hybrid cotton might remain just that—hypothetical conjecture.

It all changed in 2001 when some California growers began planting hybrid cotton sold by Hazera Seeds, an Israeli-owned company.

That first hybrid cotton, named HA-

►**Right:** Hazera's hybrid cotton is interspecific and shares some of the characteristics of both Pimas and Acalas. ►**Below:** Todd Allen's family grows the hybrid on tough high-saline soil. "It's right behind Acala in yield. We're not going to do Pima up here. We'll stick with this," he says.





►**Left:** The hybrid cotton's strong agronomic point is its vigorous growth. ►**Lower left:** The hybrid's combination of yield and quality on saline soil excites Johnny Andrews. "I haven't seen this much interest in a cotton variety since Roundup Ready varieties came out," he says.

fertilizer costs," says Todd Allen, who farms with his father, Buzz, and brother, Joel, at Firebaugh. "It is tricky to grow, though. We have to be real careful with water. We're learning to manage that growth with Pix growth regulator and by using a pressure bomb to test stress in the plant.

"This was our second year with it," he adds. "We're learning how to handle it. We're growing it on high-salt soil, a tough piece of dirt. It's exciting."

At Dos Palos, Johnny and Jonathan Andrews, a father-son team, had struggled to grow cotton on heavy, high-salt soil. They decided to give the hybrid a try and liked what they saw.

"I think the hybrid cotton is going to keep people farming on this type of soil in business," Johnny says. "I also think we're going to see more and more demand for it from mills."

With the hybrid priced a little under Pima but out-yielding Acala on his place, its future could be bright and tantalizing to growers, Johnny says. "If it produces well and puts more money in your hand, acreage around here could quadruple."

However, growers in the northern part of the Central Valley, where the Andrews' farm, must be cautious not to get backed into a corner with a late-maturing cotton, Hutmacher warns. And HA-195 can be just that.

Hazera is now marketing HA-175, an earlier-maturing, 150-day hybrid. "That northern area is a great niche for it," says Barry Younk, Hazera's cotton development manager based in Sanger, Calif. "Growers can rotate out of tomatoes or other crops into cotton. It's done well in that cool area. It doesn't yield as high as HA-195, but up north at least you can get cotton."

Hybrid cotton in California, from an Israeli company with seed production in China. It's a new world, for sure. ■



195 by Hazera, is interspecific, part Pima and part Acala. It yields close to Acala varieties but has fiber characteristics more like Pima. No one claims that it is spinning California's cotton industry on its ear, but the hybrid certainly draws its share of attention.

"It yields good enough to be a good fit for a number of growers. As with any variety spaced in that in-between area, there are some negatives," says Bob Hutmacher, a California Extension cotton specialist.

Growers need to find willing buyers. "It's not purely like either Pimas or the better Acalas," he says. "The main difference is fiber strength. It's generally better fiber strength than the Acalas but the approved Pimas certainly have higher strength, both in fiber and yarn."

Vigorous. The hybrid's real strength is its vigor. It'll grow on marginal ground where other cottons struggle.

"Our inputs go down with it. We use one less irrigation and cut our