

# Sugarcane

Throughout southern Louisiana, you can see many sugarcane fields along the tracks – the cane looks like huge tufts of grass, growing as tall as ten feet! Sugar cane is grown in 15 of Louisiana's parishes, mainly in the Mississippi Delta region, where the riverbank soils are especially well-suited for it. Jesuit priests introduced sugarcane to the state in 1751, at their plantation near New Orleans. Sugarcane grew in importance as a commercial crop after 1795 when the sugar-crystallization process was developed, and is the area's most important crop today.

Sugar cane is planted in the fall and sprouts in the spring. Sugar cane is not grown from seeds but instead, cane stalks are planted. One planting of cane stalks is good for three years. By late summer the cane will be eight to ten feet tall. Harvesting the cane begins in October and is usually completed by December. This is often called the "grinding season", because the cane is ground, or crushed, to extract the sweet juices.

Along the train route you may be able to spot several sugar mills. This is where the cut stalks of sugar cane are brought after harvesting in the fall. Here the cane is washed and crushed to extract the juices. Bagasse (bag-ass) is the fibrous part of the cane which is left over after grinding. It is either burned as fuel for the mill or used to make products such as paper, building boards, plastics, poultry litter, animal bedding and garden mulch.

The cane juice is purified, the water in the juice is evaporated, and a heavy syrup is formed. Now it's ready for the next and most important stage in the sugar making process, boiling.

The thick syrup is boiled in pans and is tested periodically for the forming of sugar crystals. This mixture is rotated at a high speed until centrifugal force separates the molasses from the finished product, raw crystallized sugar.

The sugar industry was so successful during the early 1800s that planters were able to develop large plantations with luxurious mansions. Prior to the Civil War Louisiana had some 1600 plantations. Crops like sugar cane were planted, tended, and harvested by thousands of African slaves. The French began bringing African slaves into the colony of Louisiana as early as the 1720's. Often slaves came to Louisiana from what is today Haiti. These men and women were experts at sugar cultivation and their skill contributed not only to the economic success of Louisiana but influenced the way plantations were laid out, the way they were run, and the architecture of the buildings.

Today most of the work of planting and harvesting sugarcane is done mechanically, but you can learn about the legacy of sugar by visiting some of the antebellum plantation homes which have been preserved and opened to the public.

## **Source(s):**

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