

# Crackerjack Operation

*Two brothers, lots of popcorn  
and a growing family.*

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY THARRAN E. GAINES

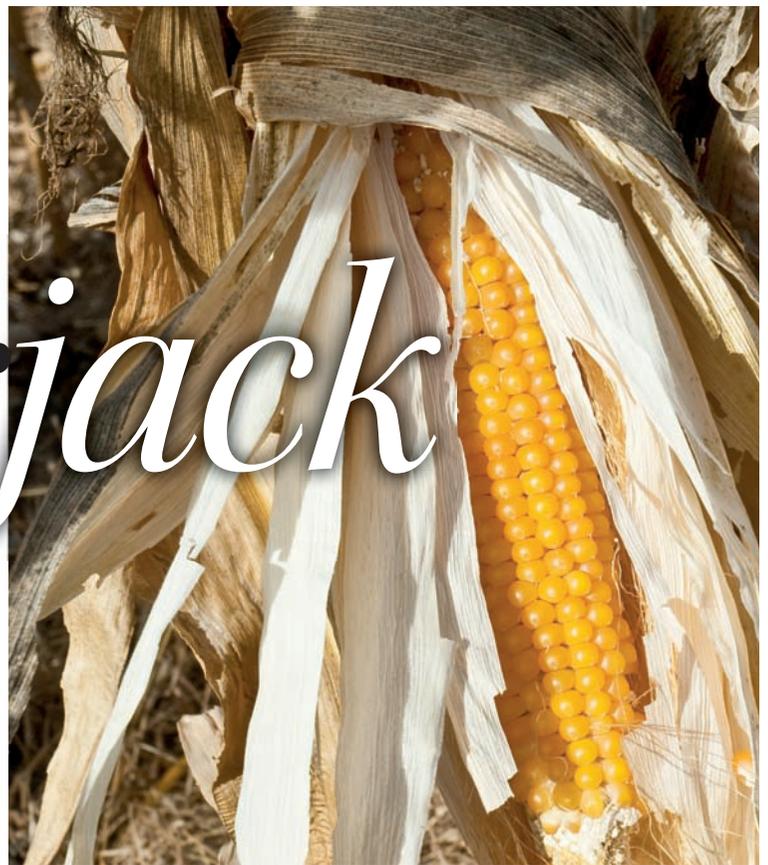
**DESPITE APPEARANCES, SHANNON MALMKAR** isn't dealing with a crop failure. You might, however, be inclined to think so upon hearing this western Nebraska farmer's yield on some of his irrigated corn—around 90 bushels per acre. But then again, this is no ordinary variety of the crop. It's popcorn.

For the record, at slightly more than half the yield for his field corn, his popcorn production is quite good, especially considering the area's sandy soil. It's a crop he and his brother, Jarret, have grown for the past 12 years. Together, they currently farm a combined total of almost 9,000 acres near Madrid, Neb., with 2,400 acres devoted to the crop that's been associated with movies and Cracker Jack for generations.

Unfortunately, despite its association with carefree, put-your-feet-up pastimes, the crop is no cinch to grow. "If it were easy, everybody would be doing it," says Shannon, who notes that popcorn is more labor-intensive than field corn at just about every stage of production.

"Roundup Ready® field corn has made us lazy farmers," Malmkar says, including himself in the comment. "We spray it twice, and we're done. With popcorn, we have to stay a lot closer to it. It doesn't necessarily cost any more to grow, but it takes a lot more management. You have to be there at the right time with both chemicals and cultivation. The old adage, 'If the popcorn is laying flat on the ground, it's ready to pick' isn't far off at times."

Even harvest can be a challenge. Not only do popcorn husks hold tighter, which slows drydown in the field, but by its nature, popcorn is hard to shell off the cob. "However, if you adjust the combine to where you're getting all the kernels off the ear, you risk cracking it, which is even worse," he adds. "So, in essence, you have to sacrifice a little yield for high quality."



*Popcorn, shown above and cradled in Shannon Malmkar's hands, proves to be a difficult crop to grow.*

