



Malmkar insists that family, which includes his wife, Teresa, and his children, Alyssa, Zack and Josh (top to bottom), is more important than land, machinery or partnerships.

Those sacrifices are appreciated by more than people, says Malmkar. “Corn borers and corn rootworms just love popcorn,” he says. “So do earworms, western bean cutworms and about everything else that crawls or flies. However, thanks to new-generation chemicals, with their shorter half-life, we can use a small quantity—often as little as 3 ounces per acre—hit them hard and see the product deteriorate in a matter of weeks.”

And that’s important, considering there isn’t much processing involved between the producer and the consumer. In fact, Malmkar points to only three steps between the field and the popcorn bag or bowl: “Pick it, clean it and pop it.”

The good news is that lower seed costs and higher commodity prices make up for the extra time and expense. There are no stacked trait hybrids in the popcorn industry, and seed production is still in the hands of several small companies. In the meantime, popcorn out of the field sells for around 16 cents a pound, give or take a penny or two, or around \$9 to \$10 per bushel.

“We still look for yield and standability when selecting hybrids, just as we do with a grain crop,” Malmkar explains. “But we also have to look at expandability, or how well it pops, as well as how well

it tastes. You can have the best popcorn in the world in terms of the first three; but nobody’s going to want it if it tastes like cardboard.”

Unknown to the average consumer is the fact that there are also two kinds of popcorn, “butterfly” and “mushroom.” Butterfly varieties have flakes (the name for popped kernels) that are irregular in shape with a number of protruding “wings.” This is the type sold in theatres and used in microwave popcorn. Mushroom varieties produce flakes that are largely ball-shaped and less fragile, which makes them ideal for packaged or confectionary popcorn, such as caramel corn or Cracker Jack. Of Shannon’s 1,100 acres, approximately 75 percent is butterfly popcorn and the remaining 25 percent is planted to mushroom varieties.

“Most generally, popcorn pops best when it’s between 13.5 and 13.7 percent moisture,” Malmkar relates. “So we try to harvest it just a little wetter at around 14.5 percent moisture. Then we let it set in the bin for a month so the moisture level can equalize.”

From there, it either goes to Preferred Popcorn, a retail/wholesale company in Chapman, Neb., or directly to the wholesale market via a broker.

“We can gain 3 to 4 cents a pound by cleaning it ourselves and going through a broker,” he continues, noting that he cleans about two-thirds of the popcorn he sells. “But we’re in the business of raising corn. We still have the facilities, but it’s hard to raise corn and still have time to clean all of it and ship it, too.”

Handling a difficult crop is tough enough, yet the two brothers recently dealt with another difficult task faced by many farmers—how to plan for the next generation’s eventual entry into the operation. That led to their decision to dissolve their partnership.

“We get along great and we still work together quite often,” Malmkar explains. “However, we both have kids who are getting older and will, hopefully, someday play a role in the farm.”

Malmkar—whose three children range in age from 6 to 11, while his brother, Jarret, has five children between the ages of 8 and 18—says they both recognized the need to make the change. Some of their children, they reason, may want to farm, while others will choose a different line of work. Having two separate operations allows an easier parsing of the operation’s assets.

“We were at a good point in our lives to divide the land and equipment; so that’s what we’ve done over the last 3 years,” he explains. “We’re not farming just to have a job. To us, it’s a way of life, and family is a big part of it. Family is more important to both of us than land or machinery.” **FL**