Yulex chose the Massey Ferguson® 492, which came from Empire Agriculture, because "it can handle the extreme conditions we work in," says Jim Mitchell. A modifed cotton harvester (below left) is used to cut guayule. The rubber from the desert shrub (below right) is hypoallergenic, meaning it won't produce allergic reactions as does Hevea*-extracted latex.*

prospects, too. While stopping short of calling it a wonder crop, McMahan, who's worked with the domestic natural rubber team for 7 years, notes that guayule's potential to produce two products—rubber and resin—is significant. Add to that the bagasse, the post-rubber and -resin extraction residue, and the plant is all the more valuable, she says. Some studies have even shown that the guayule bagasse produces 8,000 to 9,000 BTUs per pound, which is slightly more than switchgrass and shelled corn.

Everyone interviewed for this story, however, points to an even greater benefit to growing guayule on a larger scale. Having more than 90 percent of the world's natural rubber produced overseas, where it's susceptible to leaf blight is, says McMahan, "a strategic vulnerability." She adds, "Our modern way of life is not possible without natural rubber. [Guayule] also offers a possibility for security."

Martin agrees. "Just like with oil, we need to reduce our reliance on imports," he says. "I don't want to overstate this, but we rely on natural rubber from a vulnerable source.

"We are," he concludes, "so concerned about oil that we don't think about what we roll on." FL

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For more information about Yulex and the intrigue-filled histories of guayule and rubber, see **go.myfarmlife.com/yulex**.