A-Maizing-Corn Script

(Host) – Corn is the number one field crop in the United States. It’s true! Farmers in our country grow twice as many bushels of corn as any other crop. And Wisconsin plays a big role in the production of all that corn.

Our state is part of the corn belt which is made up of twelve states that grow the majority of our nation’s corn. Let’s take a closer look at how just one ear of corn contributes to the bigger picture.

An average ear of corn has eight hundred kernels spread over sixteen rows. It takes around one thousand, three hundred kernels to make a pound. That’s approximately an ear and a half of corn. Fifty-six pounds make up a bushel and there are about one hundred and fifty bushels in an acre. Wisconsin produced around three million acres of corn in 2007. If we broke that down, that means our state produces four hundred and forty million bushels, twenty-five billion pounds, and thirty-two trillion kernels every year! Seriously, that’s a lot of corn.

Now, less than one percent of corn grown in the U.S. is sweet corn. That’s the corn we eat; whether it’s fresh, frozen, or canned. The other ninety-nine percent is field corn. Field corn is used for lots of different things. Today, nearly half of the field corn that is harvested is used as feed for livestock, while the other half is divided among ethanol production, export to different countries, and the production of thousands of different products.

Just a small portion of the corn crop is actually used to produce food products like corn cereal, corn oil, corn starch, and corn syrup, which are then used in lots of different foods like ice cream, peanut butter, and donuts. Yum.

Ok, now that we know where the corn goes, let’s find out how it grows. Farmers plant in spring when the soil is warm enough to germinate the seeds. In Wisconsin, that generally means early May. Today, most farmers are planting corn in a way that’s better for the environment. Instead of plowing the fields in the spring to get rid of last year’s corn stalks, they’re planting new seeds right over the old stalks. This is called no till planting, or conservation tillage. One big advantage to no till planting is that it significantly reduces and sometimes completely eliminates soil erosion. That’s because the crop residue left from the previous harvest is able to protect the soil. No till planting also helps farmers cut down on gas expenses. These big tractors use up a lot of fuel.

Luckily, today’s tractors and combines have the latest technology which helps them use diesel fuel more efficiently. New technology is also helping farmers to produce more corn per acre. Farmers use the latest in hybrid corn seeds to grow stronger and more productive plants.

In 1967, U.S. farmers produced an average of eighty bushels of corn per acre. Twenty years later, the average corn crop was one hundred twenty bushels per acre. And in 2007, it was up to one hundred and fifty bushels per acre. At this rate, corn production is expected to hit more than two hundred bushels per acre by 2030!

As the corn stalks start to grow, they begin to develop race roots at the bottom to help support the plant since they’ll grow to become seven to ten feet tall. At the top of each plant, a tassel develops. The tassel contains hundreds of small flowers that produce pollen. Each stalk normally produces one ear of corn. Ears are covered with husks which protect the kernels as they develop. Silk-like threads stick out the top of the husks. Each strand of silk needs to be pollinated by the tassel at the top in order to produce one kernel of corn. All this happens over the span of about one hundred and thirty days which is the average amount of time it takes corn to mature.

After the corn matures, farmers typically wait a while before harvesting so the corn kernels can dry. The corn harvest takes place in the fall, usually early to mid October.

Corn is harvested using a big machine called a combine. Like other farm equipment, today’s combines have the latest technology.

So, what is all this because that looks like a video game joystick?

(Farmer) – Well, Cindy, it does look like that and what this does, is this actually controls the combine. It controls your forward and your back speeds, it controls all of our functions of our head here that gathers the corn in. These monitors here show the progress of the corn moving through the combine. This computer here actually shows what we’re planting, where we’re planting it, and how much we’re actually harvesting in yield as we’re harvesting our crop. Also, this computer here can make this combine steer by itself across a field.

(Host) – Combines can do it all. They’re really amazing machines. So, how does a combine work?

(Farmer) – Well, Cindy, the corn comes up between these chutes to the combine, goes in through a cylinder that takes the kernels off the cob, and the kernels are taken up to this bin up here, a holding bin and then the cobs are discharged off the back and when the holding bin is full, the corn then gets dumped into a truck or a wagon in this spout here.

(Host) – Ah cool, so this is, these are where the kernels come out?

(Farmer) – Yes, yep.

(Host) – Cool. Trucks like this get filled with the dry corn kernels which are then transported to local production plants.