

# These may be the best cotton-pickin' plates out there



Text and photo by Michael E.C. Gery

**W**hen Ray Keeter and Halifax County Cooperative Extension agent Arthur Whitehead sent two John Deere cotton picking machines out to the Bruce Davis farm last November, they watched each machine harvest 3.64 acres of cotton. One machine picked 7 percent more cotton than the other.

The two machines alternated picking every four rows. “You could see the difference right across the field,” says Ray Teeter. “White, brown, white, brown. Like a checkerboard.”

Ray Keeter has worked on John Deere equipment for 30 years, the last 17 on his own just south of Scotland Neck. He’ll work on “anything green,” but he’s the man to see about your Deere cotton picker. He remembers driving around and seeing all the scrap cotton still on stalks after the fall harvest, and he got to thinking about how to improve the mechanics of picking cotton. “You want to figure a way to get as much picked the first time through, instead of having to go back over the field again to get the scrap.” So he designed and built a “scrapping plate” that is more efficient than the John Deere plates. He received his patent on it last winter, and now the Raytec scrapping plates sell for \$500 per row, or \$2,000 for a four-row Deere cotton picker (models 9960 and 9965).

“Farmers will say that’s a lot of money,” Ray says. “But when the ones around here see how they do, they come in looking for them.”

The test last fall on the Brian Davis farm was not the only test of the Raytec plates, but it is the only documented one. Other tests produced similar results, Ray says. And, he

adds, everyone who’s bought the plates likes them. The test with Extension agent Whitehead showed that the Raytec plates allow a picker to harvest about 165 pounds more “seed cotton” per acre and nearly 68 pounds more “lint cotton” (seed cotton that is ginned) per acre. Using a price of 65 cents per pound, the Raytec plates could earn a farmer an additional \$44 per acre, or about \$44,000 more in a season for a 1,000-acre farm, which is fairly typical for eastern North Carolina.

Ray perfected the design during the past three years. The plates are deeper, longer and closer together than Deere plates, and they allow the spindles on a picker to grab more of a cotton boll and to pick a stalk cleaner. “It won’t strip the stalk,” Ray says, “but it picks off more and drops less on the field, so you get more cotton in the basket.”

The Raytec steel plates are specially machined and laser-cut for precision. It’s simple to remove the Deere plates and substitute the Raytecs using the same bolts. “I can do it easy, so any dummy can,” Ray says. And his plates can be adjusted to make up for wear. While they haven’t been in service long enough to know, the plates should last for 3,000-4,000 acres before they need replacing, Ray says.

After testing earlier designs during the 2001 and 2002 harvests, he almost gave up when his mother, Grace, fell ill and died last October. Ray was used to having his mother’s home-cooked dinner every day, and without her inspiration, the work slowed down, until he realized “Mama would have wanted me to keep at it.”

For information, contact Ray Keeter, 177 Ark Lane, Scotland Neck, NC 27874. Phone: (252) 826-5302.