In West Tennessee you know autumn has arrived when the leaves turn red and gold and the sides of the road turn white.

In this part of the state, cotton is the driving economic force for many rural communities, and historically, the prosperity of this area has depended upon cotton. But just as the landscape of the region has changed, so has the production of this crop. From the eradication of the boll weevil to improved fiber quality, reduction in pesticide applications, and earlier maturity, Tennessee cotton has moved into the 21st century through UT cotton research and extension efforts.

“They are a very important part of the equation,” says Gwathmey. “Because of the working relationship with producers, we’ve been able to stay on target and do work that is of direct importance to them.”

UT Extension Cotton Specialist Dr. Chris Main agrees.

“Particularly with cotton, producers have a direct impact on what projects get funded and the direction we take with those projects,” says Main. “The questions I get while working with producers lead to research ideas.”

One way researchers and specialists have increased interaction between producers has been the development of on-farm research. These days a good deal of research is done on farms in large plots using the farmer’s own production practices. This approach not only provides researchers a more accurate picture of real world results, but also helps UT Extension specialists in their outreach efforts.

“Growers trust information that comes from other growers,” says Main. “If I get consistent results at several locations, that makes a big impression on producers.”

While Tennessee cotton acres have dipped in the past few years due to weather and high grain prices, cotton research and outreach efforts continue at full speed. That’s because researchers and specialists understand the significance of this crop to this region, and the importance of keeping cotton’s infrastructure going.

“Most of the producers in West Tennessee that have historically grown cotton want to grow cotton,” says Main. “If the playing field is level between soybeans, corn and cotton, they want to grow cotton.”

And UT Institute of Agriculture will help them do that. —Ginger Trice