A S corn acres expand across the South, growers are learning plenty about the pests that can turn a bin-buster into a mediocre performer. One top tactic for taking out these problem pests is choosing the right hybrid and insect control technology for your region. With seed buying in full swing, understanding your pest complex becomes an important part of the process.

Chad Lee, grain crops specialist, University of Kentucky Extension, notes that during grower meetings in late November, more than half the farmers he talked with had bought at least some of their seed. Earlier buying and a wider range of tech tools make understanding the pest complex on your farm even more important.

Seed companies classify corn pests these days as aboveground and belowground problems.

Underground trouble
For belowground pests, the key challenge is corn rootworm, which can come in a range of varieties, including western, northern and southern. For most areas of the country, the western corn rootworm is the primary pest.

In a report on corn pests from North Carolina State University, John Van Duyn, Philip Morris professor of entomology, explains western and northern corn rootworms are moving into that state and have made their way as far east as Granville County.

Lee notes that rootworms are present in Kentucky too, but crop rotation usually can beat them.

For Southern and Mid-South growers, corn rootworm remains a limited problem, but it should be part of your scouting program. The region is still not seeing the extended diapause-variant corn rootworm that can bridge crop rotation.

When selecting hybrids, however, Lee adds that farmers may find the best choices for Southern pest control include belowground protection.

“This is not an indictment against the companies,” Lee says. “In the past, there may have been 10 options from one company, and now there seems to be 100 when you consider the trait packages. It’s a nightmare for a company to predict the genetics and which stacked traits to provide.”

Farmers also face the challenge of finding good genetics and getting that genetics in the package they wish. Many growers end up purchasing a triple stack when all they wanted was herbicide tolerance and corn borer Bt.

Aboveground challenge
Corn earworm was a tough aboveground challenge before biotech control was available. The pest, which targets the ear, is often difficult to treat using conventional insecticide sprays.

“I’ve seen some fields where earworm damage caused the most yield losses of any pests, and the Bt trait control has good value,” Lee says. He adds that where earworm pressure is lighter, farmers will want to consider the economic value of corn traits carefully.

Van Duyn notes that yield losses from earworm are traditionally low — from 3% to 5%. Of course, a 5% yield loss on $5 corn has a different value than in the past. In addition, he says third-generation earworm is the most “economically important insect pest in North Carolina.” It attacks a range of crops, from cotton to peanuts to sorghum.

Of course, it was Bt corn that revolutionized control of European corn borer, which remains an economic pest problem anywhere corn is raised. The pest, which can hit later-planted corn the hardest, can trim yields as much as 6% per tunnel per plant. Refuge requirements for Bt corn in the South have been problematic, but as more stacked-trait hybrids enter the market, growers are seeing refuge requirements fall. For example, a triple-stack product like DEKALB Genuity VT Triple PRO offers reduced Southern refuge (down to 20%) and improved coverage of corn earworm.

“Farmers know they have to plant refuges,” Lee says. “But they don’t always like it.” Reduced refuge needs and the future promise of refuge-in-the-bag products are improving refuge options for corn producers across the country.

On the horizon
It’s not the pests you can control — whether with biotech traits, insecticide sprays or seed treatments — that are the major concern. It’s the new pests. Lee notes a rising number of stinkbug challenges for his region; and stinkbugs are a problem from Texas to the coast.

The stinkbug is a grass-feeding pest, and different variants are an issue across the region. The brown stinkbug, for example, is a grass-feeding pest found in wheat and cornfields. The bug, which pierces plants and sucks plant juices, feeds on all plant parts but likes seedlings and developing grain. This early feeding can damage ears and challenge seedling corn. No-till corn can be hit hard if it’s planted into soybean or wheat stubble.

Lee points to another pest that’s been an isolated, but severe, problem. “We have some spots where wireworm is a real concern, and they’re pretty tolerant critters,” he notes. “Using the highest rate of seed treatment and another insecticide at planting may not control them. It appears relatively localized, but it’s a big problem.”

Scouting, talking to your agronomist and choosing the right hybrids and traits are key tools you’ll need to deal with the always-changing pest complex in corn.