

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

BILL BRIM NAMED 2009 GEORGIA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Vegetable farmer Bill Brim of Tifton, Ga., has made a name for himself in the produce business. An active farmer for 25 years, he currently farms about 2,500 acres of owned land and 1,500 acres of rented land.

His crops include peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, cantaloupes, watermelons, broccoli, peanuts, greens and cole crops. He raises vegetable transplants as well as pine tree seedlings in 42 greenhouses and maintains three modern facilities for packing and shipping his produce.

As a result of his long record of success as a vegetable grower, Brim has been selected as the 2009 Georgia winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Brim now joins nine other state winners from the Southeast as finalists for the award. The overall winner will be announced on Tuesday, Oct. 20 at the Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

In 1985, Brim and his partner Ed Walker bought Lewis Taylor Farms. Prior to that, Brim started working on the farm in 1972 when it was owned by his father-in-law and Walker's father. Today, Walker manages the greenhouses and a hydrocooling facility, while Brim focuses on vegetable production.

When Brim first bought the farm, it was growing tomato transplants in fields along with traditional row crops. However, a new carousel vegetable planter was introduced in 1987 that essentially eliminated the need for bare-root transplants. "So we built our first greenhouses to grow containerized transplants and take advantage of the new planting technology," says Brim. "By 1989, we were out of the bare-root transplant business, and we had to re-build our company." He eliminated most of the field crops the farm had grown and started expanding vegetable production. He added his first packing plant in 1995.

"We have been in a growth mode since 1985, and it hasn't stopped," says Brim. The farm's next expansion will include the construction of ten new greenhouses. The greenhouses currently produce 115 million vegetable transplants each year. Some of these are grown out on Lewis Taylor Farms. The rest are raised on contract for sale to vegetable farms throughout the Southeast. In addition, the greenhouses produce about 18 million pine tree seedlings that are sold to individual customers and timber companies.

Brim markets his produce through chain stores, wholesale warehouses and direct sale contracts. His produce has gained a good reputation for top quality and most is sold through contract sales.

Hydrocooling is the newest technology Brim and Walker adopted to enhance marketing. In this process, watermelons, cantaloupes and broccoli are floated in a pool. The crops are cooled by water chilled to 31 degrees and flowing at a rate of 9,000 gallons per minute. "This water brings down the temperature of the produce from 95 degrees to 45 degrees within about 20 minutes," explains Brim, "and this extends the shelf life of our crops by about 15 days."

Brim has invested heavily in food safety measures for the farm. "We manufacture our own chlorine dioxide solution to disinfect the water that cleans our crops," he says. He has also invested in technology that allows end users to trace back produce packages to individual fields should a problem be detected. Brim says, "It costs a lot to invest in food safety, but it enhances our reputation as a provider of quality produce."

His packing plants are monitored by cameras, and from his office computers, he receives real-time views of the activities in the packinghouses by using Internet links.

Brim devotes much of his time to farm labor issues. He currently has about 500 employees, and uses the H-2A labor program that allows foreign nationals to legally work in the U.S. "H-2A is a good program, and it provides us with reliable, hard-working employees, but it can be confusing until you've used it for a few years," he says. "The program involves a lot of paperwork, and we also provide lodging and transportation to and from their home countries for our guest workers." He has also installed an ATM machine on the farm for his workers to use in securely depositing their paychecks.

He installed his first water-efficient drip irrigation in 1989, and currently uses drip on about 1,500 acres. The drip lines are located within pre-formed beds covered with plastic mulch. He also plants rye between rows of plastic to minimize soil erosion.

Brim has been in the forefront in seeking a replacement for methyl bromide. This widely used fumigant controls weeds, insects, nematodes and plant diseases, but its use is being phased out. He spent several years testing compost, but found compost expensive to make and apply, and it increased plant diseases. Now, he's looking at a three-way treatment of Vapam, chloropicrin and Telone, and another combination of dimethyl disulfide and chloropicrin. He'll work with University of Georgia scientists to test other alternatives this fall.

Brim constantly evaluates new crops. Four years ago, he planted 25 acres of broccoli. He's now growing 600 acres and other South Georgia farmers started growing the crop after hearing of Brim's success.

He's now assessing potential ethanol crops. One is called Miscanthus. "We have some in a greenhouse and in a field," says Brim. Illinois studies suggest this perennial grass can grow 15 feet tall, produce 17 tons per acre, and each ton could yield 80 gallons of ethanol. "After it's made into ethanol, the pulp could replace coal in fueling power plants," he says. Next spring, he hopes to plant other potential energy crops such as switchgrass.

Locally, he has been active in the Farm Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, Northside Baptist Church, Tift County School Board and an Extension advisory committee. On the state level, he was recently appointed to a regional water planning council. He helped organize the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Association, served as its president and chaired its Labor Committee. He's an advisor to the University of Georgia's College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, and was recognized by the College for his service.

This past year, *American Vegetable Grower* magazine presented Lewis Taylor Farms with its Grower Achievement award. Brim is an agricultural advisor to Georgia's two U.S. senators. He's on the United Fresh Produce Association's Government Relations Council and served as an advisor to USDA and the Secretary of Agriculture.

Brim and his wife Deborah have two married daughters, Jennifer and Jessica, and three granddaughters. Deborah has served on boards of the Tift County United Way and the Tift County Foundation for Educational Excellence.

Beverly Sparks, University of Georgia associate dean for Extension, is state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award. "I cannot imagine a stronger candidate to represent Georgia," she says. Brian Tankersley, Tift County Extension coordinator, nominated Brim for the award. "Bill has been successful in his farming, his commitment to agriculture, his community service and his participation in the legislative process," says Tankersley.

"My partner Ed Walker allows me to be the public face of our industry and business," Brim says. "We have great team running our farms, greenhouses, packinghouses, our shop and our food safety program."

As the Georgia state winner, Brim will now receive a \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo from Swisher International of Jacksonville, Fla., a jacket and a \$200 gift certificate from the Williamson-Dickie Company, and a \$500 gift certificate from Southern States.

He is also now eligible for the \$15,000 that will go to the overall winner. Other prizes for the overall winner include the use of a Massey Ferguson tractor for a year from Massey Ferguson North America, a custom made Canvasback gun safe from Misty Morn Safe Co., and another \$500 gift certificate from the Southern States cooperative. Also, Williamson-Dickie will provide another jacket, a \$500 gift certificate and \$500 in cash to the overall winner.

Swisher International, through its Swisher Sweets cigar brand, and the Sunbelt Expo are sponsoring the Southeastern Farmer of the Year Award for the 20th consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$764,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from Georgia include: Timothy McMillian of Enigma, 1990; Bud Butcher of Senoia, 1991; James Lee Adams of Camilla, 1992; John Morgan of Mystic, 1993; Alan Verner of Rutlege, 1994; Donnie Smith of Willacoochee, 1995; Armond Morris of Ocilla, 1996; Thomas Coleman, Jr. of Hartsfield, 1997; Glenn Heard of Bainbridge, 1998; Bob McLendon of Leary, 1999; James Lee Adams of Camilla, 2000; Daniel Johnson of Alma, 2001; Armond Morris of Ocilla, 2002; Jim Donaldson of Metter, 2003; Joe Boddiford of Sylvania, 2004; Jimmy Webb of Leary, 2005; Gary Paulk of Wray, 2006; Daniel Johnson of Alma, 2007; and Wayne McKinnon of Douglas, 2008.

Georgia has had two overall winners with James Lee Adams of Camilla in 2000 and Armond Morris of Ocilla in 2002.

Brim's farm, along with the farms of the other nine state finalists, will be visited by a distinguished panel of judges during the week of Aug. 10-14. The judges for this year include Elwyn Deal, a retired Clemson University Extension leader from Anderson, S.C.; James Lee Adams, a farmer from Camilla, Ga., and the overall winner of the award in 2000; and Jim Bone, manager of field development for DuPont Crop Protection from Valdosta, Ga.

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Note to media: Lewis Taylor Farms owned by Brim will be visited by the judges on Monday, Aug. 10 from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m. The farm is located at 195 TyTy-Omega Road, Tifton, GA 31793. If you would like to visit the farm during the judging, please call Janie Batson at 704-788-7026, or contact her by e-mail at jbbatson@ctc.net, or contact Brim by calling 229-382-4454.

