

# Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

*Press Release*

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For Immediate Release

## **DONALD GANT NAMED 2009 MISSISSIPPI FARMER OF THE YEAR**

Family farming is important for Donald Gant of Merigold, Miss. Over the course of his 39-year career, he started with 300 acres of rented land in the Mississippi Delta and built his operation into an impressive 6,192 acres devoted primarily to row crops.

His operation today includes 2,127 acres of rented land and 4,065 acres of owned land. He has developed a strong record for overall production and yields, with 1,000 acres of rice yielding 182 bushels per acre, 960 acres of corn yielding 170 bushels per acre, 3,200 acres of soybeans yielding 41 bushels per acre, and 1,122 acres of wheat yielding 74 bushels per acre. He also owns and maintains 320 acres of forested land.

As a result of his accomplishments as an outstanding row crop farmer, Gant has been selected as the 2009 Mississippi winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Gant 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.

“I was raised on an 80-acre farm,” he recalls. “There, we grew cotton, soybeans, corn, hogs and chickens. We didn’t have much money but we had a great family life.” After high school, he worked at an elevator, joined the National Guard and then went to college. He graduated from Delta State University with an accounting degree in 1970.

About the same time, his dad lost a lease to the land he farmed, but was offered another lease on 300 acres of cropland. “My dad asked me to farm with him, so I did, and I’ve been farming and expanding ever since,” says Gant. “My dad hasn’t been active on the farm during the past 20 years, but early on, he turned over the finances and record keeping to me.”

“I’m always looking for good ground to purchase or rent,” he says. “We bought our first 120 acres of land in 1976, then bought 1,008 acres in 1978 or 1979.” The last 440-acre parcel he bought is located near the city of Cleveland, Miss., and may have development potential. He farmed this land ten years before the owners asked him to buy it. He says he paid more for this land than all of his previous land purchases combined.

Gant has excelled in marketing as well as in production. If prices look profitable, he tries to sell 60% of his anticipated production prior to harvest. “In 2008, I booked 85% of my

soybeans, 75% of our corn, and 100% of our rice,” he says. “We raise half of our rice for seed for Sanders Seed Company. A fourth of our rice crop goes to Producers Rice Mill Corp., and the remainder is sold commercially. We ended up with great prices for our 2008 crops, \$11.25 per bushel on soybeans, \$5.60 per bushel on corn, and more than \$8 per bushel with the seed premium on rice. For 2009, we have 80% of our wheat booked for \$9.50 and it’s all seed wheat. Also for 2009, we have booked about 75% of our soybeans and 50% of our corn.” He also buys puts and calls at times.

For about 20 years, he raised catfish on 220 acres, and made money on fish during the early years. But catfish farming grew less profitable, so he drained his ponds ten years ago and now grows rice and soybeans on this land. “We may find some new uses for this land,” he says. “For example, we could re-flood our pond land and raise algae as an energy or biofuel crop.”

Environmental stewardship is important for Gant. Wood duck boxes can be seen in a pond near his home and elsewhere on the farm. On his timberland, he planted flood-prone terrain to cypress trees and steep ridges to oaks. His flood and furrow irrigation practices feature water control structures to contain runoff. “I leave some crops in place, then flood fields for waterfowl during the winter. And I plant sunflowers and food plots for the wildlife,” he says. Also, he was an early user of no till planting. Some of his land hasn’t been tilled in 20 years. “We grow corn, wheat and soybeans where we no till the land,” he says.

Gant irrigates his corn, rice and about two thirds of his soybeans. “Most of our ground is precision leveled,” he says. “We have 50 irrigation wells and can water all but about 460 acres.”

In addition to family members, he employs five fulltime, long-term workers. He’s proud that each family member and employee completes their daily assigned tasks without supervision.

The grain storage capacity on his farm is 450,000 bushels, and he dries grain without using heat. “We just let the fans run 24 hours a day,” he explains. “You need good airflow, and it also requires harvesting at 17-18% moisture rather than at 20-22%. So we let the sun help dry our crops before harvest. Rice milling quality and seed quality are also better when we don’t heat the air.”

Joe Street, associate director of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, is the state coordinator for the Farmer of the Year award. Laura Giaccaglia, interim Extension director in Bolivar County, nominated Gant for the award. She admires him for including his family in the farm operation. “The Gants are involved in 4-H, they’re good farmers and he is a man of good character,” she says. “He is active in commodity organizations and is a reliable volunteer.”

Gant gives freely of his time. He plays Santa Claus each Christmas at a nursing home. Locally, he’s active in Farm Bureau, Morrison Chapel Baptist Church, an Extension

advisory council, soil and water conservation, Delta Council, Delta Rice Promotions, Federal Land Bank and Delta State University Alumni. He has volunteered for local 4-H, Relay for Life and Save a Life organizations, and at Bayou Academy.

A current vice president of Mississippi Farm Bureau, he has also chaired its Rice Committee. He's a member of Mississippi's Soybean Association and Certified Seed Association. He also serves on land use and agricultural communications committees. He has advised state officials on water issues and he chairs the Mississippi Rice Promotion Board.

He's a director of the U.S. Rice Producers Association and served on a national rice committee. He's also a member of the American Soybean Association and the National Corn Growers Association. He won an environmental stewardship award from Delta Farmers Advocating Resource Management (FARM), and the Delta Council recognized his contributions to the rice industry.

His wife Lil is active in Farm Bureau, rice promotion, their local church and Relay for Life. She also volunteers for 4-H and Delta State University's Child Development Center.

He and Lil have three grown children. Sons Mike and Scott are full partners in the farm, while their daughter Cindy works for Sanders Seed Co. "The Lord has blessed me a lot," says Gant.

As Mississippi winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Gant 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 Mississippi include: Hugh Arant, Sr. of Ruleville, 1990; Bill Hawks of Hernando, 1991; Kenneth Hood of Gunnison, 1992; Tol Thomas of Cruger, 1993; Rick Parsons of Vance, 1994; Ed Hester of Benoit, 1995; Bill Harris of Benton, 1996; Robert Miller of Greenwood, 1997; Ted Kendall, III of Bolton, 1998; Wayne Bush of Schlater, 1999; William Tackett of Schlater, 2000; Willard Jack of Belzoni, 2001; Hugh Arant, Jr. of Ruleville, 2002; Rick Parsons of Vance, 2003; Sledge Taylor of

Como, 2004; Laurance Carter of Rollins Fork, 2005; Brooks Aycock of Belzoni, 2006; Tom Robertson of Indianola, 2007 and Gibb Steele III of Hollandale, 2008.

Mississippi has had three overall winners with Kenneth Hood of Gunnison in 1993, Ed Hester of Benoit in 1995 and Willard Jack of Belzoni in 2001.

Gant'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, manger of field development for DuPont Crop Protection from Valdosta, Ga.

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**Note to media:** The farm of Donald Gant will be visited by the judges on Wednesday, Aug. 12 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The farm is located at 2538 Crosby Rd., Merigold, MS 38732. 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](mailto:jbbatson@ctc.net), or contact the Gant family by calling 662-748-2324.