

# Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

*Press Release*  
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For Immediate Release

## **FRED PITTILLO NAMED 2009 NORTH CAROLINA FARMER OF THE YEAR**

Fred W. Pittillo of Hendersonville, N.C., made a successful transition from dairy farming into turfgrass production. His Turf Mountain Sod farm grows cool season fescue, bluegrass and bentgrass turf varieties on about 1,200 acres in the mountains of western North Carolina. He raises sod on about 400 acres of rented land and 800 acres of owned land. The grasses stay green most of the year, even after the first frost.

He produces, delivers and installs sod for customers in an area from Raleigh, N.C. to Knoxville, Tenn., and from Atlanta, Ga., to Bristol, Va. The lessons he learned in the dairy business continue to pay dividends for his sod business. In developing his sod business, he says, "I have been able to use the good farming practices and work ethic that came with dairy farming."

As a result of his accomplishments as a turfgrass producer, Pittillo has been selected as the 2009 North Carolina winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Pittillo 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.

Pittillo recalls his childhood, growing up on a poor mountain farm. "My dad grew up on a farm before tractors came into widespread use," he says. "Our first dairy enterprise consisted of four or five cows tied to trees that were milked by hand. When I was four, I was given the job of milking a cow named Fancy because she wouldn't kick. My dad had a team of horses, Pug and Pearl, and I cried and cried when he sold Pug." His dad eventually bought a tractor in 1945, and a few years later he bought another one, equipped with a forage harvester and a tractor-mounted corn picker. "We were really farming then," recalls Pittillo with a chuckle.

Over the years, Pittillo developed an affection for old tractors and began collecting Oliver models. His extensive collection now includes dozens of green Oliver tractors, many fully restored. They can be seen at the entrance to his farm and in his storage buildings.

During the early 1970's, he and a brother bought out the family dairy farm. A few years later, his brother left the farm to enter building construction. Pittillo held his own in the dairy business, but looked for more lucrative enterprises in the 1980's. He says, "I had

children interested in farming, but I didn't feel the dairy would support us all so I had to figure out some other way of surviving in farming."

He tried growing carrots for Campbell Soup. "I didn't lose any money, but I did not make any either," he says of the carrot venture. In 1987, he planted four acres of Falcon fescue sod and later that summer he sold his first sod to a camp in Hendersonville. "We bought a second-hand walk-behind sod harvester from a golf course and used it to cut the sod," he recalls. "We rolled it, put it on pallets and took it to the job site." The next year, he expanded to 18 acres, and secured a loan to buy more used sod harvesting equipment.

He says there are no "bulk" buyers of turfgrass. Marketing to individuals is a key to success. As a first step, he tries to educate end users on the importance and benefits of sod. By the early 1990's, he was hired to provide and install sod for big jobs such as new golf courses. As demand for his sod grew, he sold his last dairy cows in 1993.

Apple farming is a major enterprise in his community, and though he doesn't grow apples, he used contacts in this industry to attract a reliable Hispanic labor force. He also says, "I also learned a lot in marketing milk, mainly not to price our product too cheap. We are always striving to sell a quality product at a fair price."

For several years, his was the only farm supplying sod in his area. At one point, he grew his sod installation business faster than he grew his sod production, so he bought sod from other growers to supply his growing base of customers.

Pittillo believes God blessed his timing to get into the sod business. "Today, would be a terrible time to do the same thing," he says. "The economy has turned down and that has hurt the demand for turfgrass." He now has sod ready for harvest, yet not enough customers ready to put it on their land. He says, "It costs us to maintain a field of sod that is ready for harvesting when customers are not ready to use it."

He met his wife Merle while getting a two-year associate degree in agriculture from N.C. State University. The two of them adopted a 'pay as you go' philosophy in making major purchases. Pittillo says Merle handled bookkeeping and kept bills paid so he could get the parts and equipment he needed for the operation.

Now, their son, Wayne, and their daughter, Linda Bradley, are both involved in the sod business, as is Linda's husband, David. Another daughter, Candi, lives nearby and works as a teacher. Pittillo is now in the process of turning over to his children the day-to-day responsibilities of running the farm.

Pittillo has served his community. For more than 25 years, he was a member of the local Farm Service Agency committee. He supports local Farm-City Day activities and has been active in Fruitland Baptist Church. He's currently a member of the Edneyville Grange, a Henderson County Extension advisory board, the Mountain Men Tractor Pullers Association, North Carolina Farm Bureau and the Edneyville Community Center Association.

In past years, he was a member of a host of dairy farming organizations, Henderson County Chamber of Commerce committees, a Henderson County planning board, a hospital foundation board and was a volunteer firefighter. He helped organize and lead the N.C. Sod Producers Association and has served on the board of Turfgrass Producers International. He is a board member of the N.C. State University Ag Foundation. He has also served as a trustee of Mars Hill College and Fruitland Bible Institute.

Ken Powell, director of field services with N.C. Farm Bureau, is the state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award. Pittillo was nominated for the award by his daughter Linda. After coming to work for the farm in 1995, she gained a greater appreciation of how her parents worked together to build the operation. She also admires her dad's business decisions, his initiative in organizing North Carolina sod producers and his honesty in dealing with customers.

“My family is still close and I am a happy man,” says Pittillo. He has seven grandchildren and two great grandchildren and one of his great joys is seeing them enjoy the farm.

As the North Carolina state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Pittillo 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 North Carolina include John Vollmer of Bunn, 1990; Kenneth Jones of Pink Hill, 1991; John Howard, Jr. of Deep Run, 1992; Carlyle Ferguson of Waynesville, 1993; Dick Tunnell of Swan Quarter, 1994; Allan Lee Baucom of Monroe, 1995; Scott Whitford of Grantsboro, 1996; Williams Covington, Sr. of Mebane, 1997; Phil McLain of Statesville, 1998; Earl Hendrix of Raeford, 1999; Reid Gray of Statesville, 2000; Rusty Cox of Monroe, 2001; Craven Register of Clinton, 2002; Frank Howey, Jr. of Monroe, 2003; Eddie Johnson of Elkin, 2004; Danny McConnell of Hendersonville, 2005; Tommy Porter of Concord, 2006; Bill Cameron of Raeford, 2007; and V. Mac Baldwin of Yanceyville, 2008.

North Carolina has had two overall winners with Eddie Johnson of Elkin being selected as the Southeastern Farmer of the Year in 2004 and Bill Cameron of Raeford being named in 2007.

Pittillo'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:** The farm of Fred Pittillo will be visited by the judges on Friday, Aug. 14 from 1 p.m. until 4 p.m. Pittillo's Turf Mountain Sod farm, is located at 3277 Chimney Rock Road, Hendersonville, NC 28792. 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 Pittillos by calling 828-685-3642.