

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release
Contact: Janie Batson
704-788-7026
e-mail: jbbatson@ctc.net

For Immediate Release

THOMAS R. DURANT NAMED 2009 SOUTH CAROLINA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Thomas DuRant of Gable, S.C., has developed a remarkable farming record. His crops include flue-cured tobacco on 75 acres, corn on 500 acres and soybeans on 1,900 acres.

His yields are notable, about 2,675 pounds per acre for flue cured tobacco, 117 bushels per acre over a five-year period for corn, and 35 bushels per acre for soybeans over a three-year period.

As a result of his success as a diversified row crop farmer, DuRant has been selected as the 2009 South Carolina winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. DuRant 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.

He grew up on a family farm operated by his father and uncle who held the state corn yield record for many years. DuRant worked in real estate appraisal after graduating from Clemson University, but came back to the farm in 1989, the year Hurricane Hugo hit the area. "When my uncle became terminally ill, my father asked me to rejoin the farm that he and his nephew were then operating," he recalls. "I did and after ten years, I purchased my uncle's half of the farm from my cousin and farmed with my father until his recent death."

DuRant rents almost all of the 2,500 acres he farms. "You can tie up too much capital in owning land," he says. "By renting, my capital can be put to better use. I rent from the same families my dad and uncle rented from, and doing that depends on maintaining the good relationships they built."

The tobacco quota buyout helped his farm. It allowed tobacco to be planted closer to his curing barns, and it allowed him to better rotate his tobacco with other crops. "A longer rotation is why our tobacco yields have increased," he says.

How much tobacco he grows depends on his costs and contract prices. Though he's growing tobacco this year, he grew no tobacco in 2008. "Last year, the cost of propane for curing was twice as high as this year, and that would have kept me from making a

profit,” he explains. “That was the first time in three generations we did not grow tobacco on this farm. This year, I saw an opportunity to make money with tobacco because of the lower propane cost, so I’m growing 75 acres, the least I’ve ever grown. Our tobacco infrastructure is such that I do not have to grow tobacco.”

He’s also taking part in a Clemson University study that may lead to a reduction in potassium fertilizer for tobacco. The plots should show if reducing potassium rates harms the yield, curability and leaf quality. “Our goal is to maintain soil nutrients, not deplete them, but we don’t want to apply fertilizer if it is not needed, because it is expensive,” he adds.

As grain prices rose at the end of the 2007 growing season, many farmers put in new in grain storage facilities, but DuRant delayed making such investments. “I felt I needed irrigation to produce more bushels before I invested in grain bins,” he says. “I learned this from a farmer who bought grain bins before he started irrigating, and he suffered a big loss as a result. I still think grain bins are a good idea, but I installed three center pivot systems instead.” He grew soybeans beneath the pivots last year and corn beneath them this year. Both crops received good rains and he didn’t need to operate his pivots very often. “I can make money when the pivots are not running,” he adds.

One major change he made involved switching from conventional tillage to strip tillage, and next year he will be using no tillage planting. DuRant takes pride in his environmental stewardship. “The switch from conventional tillage to strip tillage and no tillage enhances our soil productivity,” he says. “Wind and water erosion have been reduced along with fuel consumption and labor costs. The soil is less compacted and supports food and cover year-round for wildlife. Our 2010 farm plan includes planting cover crops following tobacco and soybeans that produce low crop residues. Updating equipment to complement the technology changes, and liquidating unused equipment have been part of this process.”

He has also adopted grid-based soil sampling to get more efficient use of nutrients, and hopes to eventually identify separate management zones within each field. He also hopes to invest in auto-steer tractor technology to reduce soil compaction and perhaps reduce the need for subsoiling.

DuRant regularly consults several experts for advice on commodity prices, marketing strategies and enterprise budgets. He uses futures contracts, basis contracts, price-later contracts and storage agreements in marketing his crops.

He also owns and operates a sporting clays target shooting range. This provides an outside source of income while presenting a positive public image. “We do not generate a large income from this enterprise, but we have benefited from the contacts we have made,” he explains. “Customers include some of our larger landowners. The clubhouse facilities are used by community and church groups, local and statewide businesses, farm vendors, financial institutions and soil and water conservation groups.”

George Askew, associate dean for agriculture and natural resources with Clemson Extension, is the state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award. Russell Duncan, Clemson Extension agent in Clarendon and Williamsburg counties, nominated DuRant for the award. "Thomas is one of our better farmers," says Duncan. "He does an outstanding job in diversified farm production, and is also a strong farm leader who gives back to his community."

DuRant is active in a number of Clarendon County organizations, including the Striped Bass Festival, Farm Bureau and a Clemson Extension advisory board. In past years, he served on Clarendon Memorial Hospital's Cypress Foundation board. He is an elder in the New Harmony Presbyterian Church. He is a member of the S.C. Tobacco Board and the S.C. Tobacco Growers Association. He has also taken part in a leadership program and won production awards sponsored by Philip Morris.

He and his wife Jennifer have four children. Thomas R. DuRant, Jr., 18, will major in agriculture at Clemson University this fall. Joshua is 15. Their daughter Emily is 10 and their youngest son Zachary is 4. Both older sons work on the farm and help manage the sporting clay shooting range.

Jennifer is active in New Harmony Presbyterian Church. She has been active in Toastmasters, S.C. Farm Bureau Young Farmer Committee and the American Business Women's Association. She also volunteered in the cleanup after Hurricane Katrina.

DuRant is proud to follow his father in the farming profession. "Farming is more of a calling than a job, and my dad would have been a success in any occupation," he says. "He served other people, and I've tried to do the same. I'm just continuing what he started."

As the South Carolina state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, DuRant 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 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 since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from South Carolina include: C. E. Thraikill of Fort Lawn, 1990; Charles Snowden of Hemingway, 1991; Robert E. Connelly, Sr. of Ulmer, 1992; Henry Elliott, Sr. of Andrews, 1993; Ron Stephenson of Chester, 1994; Greg Hyman of Conway, 1995; Randy Lovett of Nichols, 1996; David Drew of Mullins, 1997; Jerry Edge of Conway, 1998; Blake McIntyre, III of Marion, 1999; Raymond Galloway of Darlington, 2000; W. R. Simpson of Manning, 2001; Gill Rogers of Hartsville, 2002; Harold Pitts of Newberry, 2003; Earl Thraikill of Fort Lawn, 2004; Chalmers Carr of Ridge Spring, 2005; Steve Gamble of Sardinia, 2006; William Johnson of Conway, 2007; and Kent Wannamaker of St. Matthews, 2008.

South Carolina has had one overall winner with Ron Stephenson of Chester being selected as the Southeastern Farmer of the Year in 1994.

DuRant's farm, along with 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 Thomas DuRant will be visited by the judges on Monday, Aug. 10 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. DuRant lives at 13345 N. Brewington Road, Gable, SC 29051. 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 the Durant by calling 803-473-3326.