

Swisher Sweet/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

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

For Immediate Release

BRIAN KIRKSEY NAMED 2008 ARKANSAS FARMER OF THE YEAR

Deep in the woods of Southwest Arkansas, fourth generation farmer Brian Kirksey of Amity, Ark., found a way to stay on the farm by growing nursery plants for the wholesale market. In addition, he raises cattle, hay and timber on his family's 305-acre farm.

Kirksey's Spring Creek Farms specializes in horticultural plants grown outside and in greenhouses on about eight acres. His farm consists of 205 acres of family owned land and another 100 acres of leased land. He grows pine trees on 100 acres, bahiagrass and bermudagrass on 70 acres and fruit trees on about a half-acre. He also raises 45 head of beef cattle.

As a result of his success as a nursery plant grower and in other phases of farming, Kirksey has been selected as the 2008 Arkansas winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Kirksey now joins nine other state winners from the Southeast as finalists for the award. The overall winner will be announced on Tuesday, Oct. 14 at the Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

His 20 greenhouses cover about 70,000 square feet of space. "We created a business in the middle of nowhere," says Kirksey. "We sell to customers in Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas. We do our own trucking and deliver directly to our customers."

Nan, his wife of 25 years, says the nursery is a good farm-related enterprise for making a living on a farm with a limited amount of land. "If it wasn't for the nursery, we wouldn't be living here on the farm," adds Kirksey.

Kirksey started in 1985 with two greenhouses, and grew 60,000 cuttings the first year. "That started us in liner production," he says. Liners are trays of young plants grown for sale to wholesalers or retailers who then grow them to larger sizes before selling to consumers.

His first customer was East Nursery, a local firm no longer in business where he worked from the ninth grade until he graduated from Henderson State University. This apprenticeship provided valuable information for producing and marketing plants.

A base of wholesale and landscape customers support Kirksey's horticultural business. He sends out fall price lists and books orders for delivery the next year. "This matches our inventory with needs of our customers," he explains. "Our repeat clients depend on the reliability of our plants and on our customer service."

"When I started, we took plants from three-inch pots and grew them to fit in six- or seven-inch pots," says Kirksey. "At that point, we contracted with East Nursery. We also grew 50,000 shrubs in one-gallon containers." As his plant business grew, Kirksey grew plants in even larger containers. "We started with one-gallon containers and moved to three-, seven- and ten-gallon sizes," he explains. "People wanted instant landscapes to go with their new homes, and growing plants in larger containers will be a big part of our future in this business."

"We grew azaleas at first, and we still grow azaleas," he says. In recent years, however, the market for azaleas dwindled. Kirksey says retailers use azaleas as loss leaders. After azaleas, he branched out into small fruits. Blueberries, muscadine grapes, blackberries and figs are now among his major products. "Small fruits have been a good business line for us," he adds. He also started growing a host of woody ornamentals, holly plants, daylilies, lily-like hosta plants, Bradford pears and dogwoods.

The recent slowdown in housing construction has dampened his business some. "Our business had been recession proof," he notes. "We were more affected by weather than the economy. Last year, when our business was down about 15% in sales, that was due more to the hot, dry weather than to the housing economy."

After building his own greenhouses, Kirksey started building greenhouses for others. "We have built more than 500 greenhouses in a three-state area, and this sideline created capital we used to buy land and cattle," he adds.

His beef herd consists of Brangus and Brangus cross cattle. "Our reputation for raising good quality Brangus heifers and cows lets us sell both directly from the pasture and at the local auction," says Kirksey. "We recently expanded our cattle operation by using separate pastures for rotational grazing, and we plan to increase our cattle herd to 100 head. We also grow bermudagrass and bahiagrass hay we feed to our herd and sell to local farmers."

The Kirkseys also raise pine trees. "Earlier this year, we re-forested ten acres we cut for timber," he says. "We plant trees on land not used for grazing. The timber provides additional diversity and supplements our income when other farm revenues are down."

Kirksey has also adopted environmentally friendly practices. He gets extra use from thick plastic film that initially covers his greenhouses by placing it over hay bales. This protects hay from moisture damage and maintains overall forage quality. He also re-uses much of the water used to irrigate his nursery plants. He recovers about 75% of the pond water used for irrigation, and plans to recover even more in the years ahead.

In addition, Kirksey works part time as manager of Alpine Water Association. His Spring Creek Farms provides backhoe services to the water utility. “This extra income allows for upkeep of the backhoe for the farm where it is used to expand water resources and in other areas of farm development,” he adds.

Kirksey’s now deceased grandfather helped him get his start in the nursery business, and his mom and dad continue to help out. His mother works in the nursery office and his dad helps with the cattle and in harvesting about a thousand round bales of hay each year. “My brother lives in the city and helps out on weekends,” says Kirksey. “We’ve been successful because our family has worked together.”

Kirksey is active in many organizations, including the South Central Rural Electric Co-op, Clark County Soil Conservation District, Farm Credit advisory board, Caddo River Consortium, Clark County Cattlemen’s Association, Arkansas Electric Cooperative Corporation, Arkansas Green Industry, Arkansas Rural Water Association, Arkansas State Plumbing Association and Arkansas Farm Bureau.

Nan has been active as a member of the Centerpoint School board, Arkansas School Board Association, Council for Exceptional Children and the National School Board Association. Both Nan and Brian are also active in Amity United Methodist Church. Nan also works as a part time teacher for an educational cooperative. “I’m a traveling teacher for kids with special needs,” she adds.

Brian and Nan have two children. Daughter Kathryn, 19, attends Henderson State University. Son John Brian, 13, is entering eighth grade. Both have raised and shown market steers. The Kirkseys are strong supporters of local FFA. Both children and their parents enjoy horse riding, and Kathryn has benefited from an American Quarter Horse Association scholarship.

Jerry Clemons, Extension agent in Clark County, Ark., nominated Kirksey for the Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. The state coordinator for the award is Andrew B. “Andy” Guffey with Arkansas Farm Bureau. “The Kirksey family is a fine example of the diversity of Arkansas Agricultural producers,” says Guffey.

“This farm has provided a great life for us and our kids,” says Kiksey. “I can’t say how blessed we have been to be able to make a living while living on a farm that wouldn’t normally support a family financially. I’m sure that if I wanted to, I could have twice the business as I have in ornamental and landscape plants. But I coach my kids’ ball teams, and family is very important to me.”

As the Arkansas state winner, Kirksey will now receive s \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo from Swisher International of Jacksonville, FL, 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 \$14,000 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 19th consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$724,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Kirksey is the second state winner from Arkansas. The award was opened to Arkansas farmers for competition for the first time during 2007, and the state winner that year was Michael G. Simon of Conway.

Kirksey'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. 4-8. The judges for this year include Jim Butler, a retired USDA agricultural engineer and research leader; Elwyn Deal, a retired Clemson University Extension leader; and James Lee Adams, a farmer from Camilla, Ga., and the overall winner of the award in 2000.

###

Note to media: The farm of Brian Kirksey will be visited by the judges on Wednesday, Aug. 6 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The Kirksey farm is located at 1036 Fendley Rd., Amity, AR 71921. 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 Kirkseys by calling 870-342-9528.