

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

KENT WANNAMAKER NAMED 2008 SOUTH CAROLINA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Kendall “Kent” Wannamaker of St. Matthews, S.C., is proof that a farmer can get a strong start in farming by renting land for growing crops, even with little in the way of initial financial resources. “I farm rented land, and started from scratch,” he said. “It was hard because at first I couldn’t get a loan.”

Eventually, he was able to get his first loan, and has since built his operation into some 2,800 acres. He’s growing about 900 acres of cotton, 800 acres of peanuts, 750 acres of corn, 300 acres of soybeans and 200 acres of wheat. He says he’s proud to carry on a Wannamaker family tradition of growing cotton that goes back many generations.

As a result of his accomplishments as a row crop farmer, Wannamaker has been selected as the 2008 South Carolina winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Wannamaker 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.

Wannamaker’s yields are 1,300 pounds of cotton per acre on irrigated land and 750 pounds per acre on non-irrigated land, 180 bushels per acre of corn on irrigated land and 110 bushels per acre on non-irrigated land, and 4,700 pounds of peanuts on irrigated land and 3,500 pounds per acre on non-irrigated land.

“I grew up on a farm,” says Wannamaker. “My father and uncle farmed, as did previous generations of my family. I worked for my father and uncle on their operation for five years after I graduated from Clemson University. Then, they put their farm land into the Conservation Reserve Program, and I decided to try and start farming on my own.”

He primarily raised hogs from 1984 until 2000, and has been raising row crops since 1995. He was able to get access to 30 acres of his grandmother’s land, and used that land base to launch his initial farming venture raising hogs.

At one point, Wannamaker had a 500-sow farrow-to-finish swine operation. “When I got into the hog business, I had three to four buyers who wanted to bid on my hogs,” he says. “When I got out of swine farming, there was only one buyer and I almost had to beg him to come and get them.” Now, almost all of the hog production in South Carolina is

marketed through contracting. He leases out his swine facilities to a farmer who raises hogs on contract. Once out of swine farming, Wannamaker turned his attention to row crop farming. "I'd have to say that cotton has been a mainstay on my farm," he says. He has reduced labor and equipment costs in growing cotton by replacing two four-row pickers with one six-row picker.

For the past several years, he has subscribed to a market advisory service. He receives daily reports on market trends and suggestions on when to price crops. "I do a limited amount of crop hedging, and I have tried marketing my crops through co-ops, but I really prefer to price the crops myself," he explains. Much of his cotton is forward contracted or sold after ginning. He is also able to store the grain he produces on the farm for delivery to market during the winter months when crop prices tend to strengthen. He contracts his peanuts prior to planting.

"We had no peanuts here until about five years ago," he recalls. "When the 2002 farm bill abolished the peanut quota program, it opened peanut farming up to us, and we've grown them ever since. Peanuts are a great rotation crop for cotton." One of the significant benefits to a peanut-cotton rotation is less nematode damage to both crops.

Wannamaker and other local farmers invested in a peanut buying station, Carolina Peanut LLC in Cameron, S.C. They converted an old soybean buying point to handle peanuts. Then, in 2004 he and other farmers bought a cotton gin, Farmers Gin Co., LLC in St. Matthews. Last year, the peanut buying point handled 20,000 tons of peanuts and the gin processed 18,000 bales of cotton. "The peanut buying station has not only benefited me and my partners, but also many other local farmers by providing them with a home for their peanuts at competitive prices along with farmer-friendly service," he explains. "We built the cotton gin business one farmer at a time." He and his partners made major repairs to the gin and recently added a module feeder to improve the efficiency of feeding cotton from modules into the gin.

Wannamaker and his wife Mary Lil have two children, a daughter, Lindsey, and a son, Kendall. Lindsey is a senior at Newberry College majoring in early childhood education. Kendall will be a sophomore at Clemson University majoring in biological sciences. He hopes to later attend medical school. Mary Lil contributes to the farm by keeping its financial records. She also helped to manage the office of the peanut buying point during its startup years.

Among his innovative production practices, he was an early adopter of strip tillage planting. Wannamaker farms highly erodible land and this method of conservation tillage prevents soil erosion and improves water infiltration. He had earlier used conventional tillage such as subsoiling, bottom plowing and disking, but found the best planting method for most of his crops was to use strip tillage. With this method cover crops are desiccated with herbicides and only a narrow strip is tilled for planting. "I have improved this even more since I started using a global positioning system (GPS) to subsoil the same row every other year," he says. "This saves on fuel expenses, wear and

tear on our equipment and allows us to cover more acres each day.” He also notes that GPS has allowed him to reduce peanut digging losses by about 200 pounds per acre.

Early on in his farming career, he decided to rent land rather than buy it. “I haven’t bought any land. I felt I was better off investing capital into growing my farming operation rather than buying land,” he explains. “I just don’t want to be tied to making payments to service land debt. I want to farm because I *want* to farm, not because I have to make a land payment.”

Wannamaker is a commissioner with the Calhoun County Soil & Water Conservation District, serves on a local Extension advisory committee and is active in Farm Bureau and in cotton organizations. The family is also active in St. Paul United Methodist Church in St. Matthews.

George R. Askew with Clemson University is the state coordinator for the Farmer of the Year award in South Carolina. Charles Davis, Extension agent in Calhoun County, S.C., nominated Wannamaker for the Farmer of the Year award. Davis says, “Kent and Mary Lil started from scratch. Nothing was handed to them.” Davis also credits Wannamaker for planting Extension-sponsored cotton variety trials and for being one of the first farmers in Calhoun County to use strip tillage planting.

As the South Carolina state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Wannamaker will now receive a \$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 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 since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from South Carolina include: C. E. Thrailkill 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 Thrailkill of Fort Lawn, 2004; Chalmers Carr of

Ridge Spring, 2005; Steve Gamble of Sardinia, 2006; and William Johnson of Conway, 2007.

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

Wannamaker'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. 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.

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Note to media: The farm of Kent Wannamaker will be visited by the judges on Friday, Aug. 8 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The Wannamakers live at 181 Academy Rd., St. Matthews, SC 29135. 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 Wannamakers by calling 803-655-5514.