

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

CARLOS VICKERS NAMED 2011 GEORGIA FARMER OF THE YEAR

A diversified crop and livestock farmer for 32 years, Carlos Vickers of Nashville, Ga., was born into a farming family. He recently added blueberries as a new crop. With a good blueberry crop next year, he hopes to harvest a million pounds of the small fruit.

As a result of his success as crop and cattle producer, Vickers has been selected as the 2011 Georgia winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Vickers now joins eight other state winners from the Southeast as finalists for the award. The overall winner will be announced on Tuesday, Oct. 18 at the Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

He farms in partnership with his brother Lamar. And Lamar's son Bradley is following in their footsteps. They farm 3,135 acres, including 2,535 acres of owned land and 600 acres of rented land. In addition to blueberries, they grow watermelons, tobacco, peanuts, cotton and corn. They also have 800 acres of timber and 300 acres of pasture for their beef cattle.

Last year's yields were impressive. Blueberries on 135 acres produced 7,000 pounds per acre. Watermelons on 100 acres produced 45,000 pounds per acre. Tobacco on 400 acres produced 2,500 pounds per acre. Peanuts on 600 acres produced 4,000 pounds per acre. Cotton on 700 acres produced 1,000 pounds per acre. And corn on 100 acres produced 180 bushels per acre.

The beef cattle operation includes 450 brood cows, 15 bulls and about 1,000 head of stocker cattle. "We buy the stockers in the fall and sell them in the early spring," says Carlos. "We mostly graze them on rye and feed them corn silage. The stockers weigh 400 pounds when we buy them and 750 to 800 pounds when we sell them." He sells the stockers in truckload lots in a video sale coordinated by Turner County Stockyard in Ashburn, Ga.

His best farming idea, growing blueberries, was inspired by his wife Judy. Ten years ago, she told Carlos about the health benefits of natural foods and the antioxidants produced in blueberries. "I wish I had planted them ten years ago," he recalls, "but I didn't plant my first blueberries until 2007." He harvests early maturing highbush blueberries by hand and later maturing rabbiteye blueberries by machine. Under ideal conditions, blueberries should produce 10,000 pounds per acre. He markets his blueberries as a member of the

Michigan Blueberry Association cooperative. Within the next two years, he hopes to build a packing facility to save on what he spends to have the blueberries packed by others.

Vickers says poor pollination hurt his blueberry and his early watermelon crops this year. And drought hit all of his crops earlier this year. "That forced me to pump irrigation water day and night," he says. All of his corn and 98% of his tobacco is irrigated, as is 50% of his cotton and peanuts. He irrigates blueberries with drip irrigation, and he can use overhead irrigation during late winter to protect blueberries from frost.

His 400 acres of flue cured tobacco is up considerably from the 135 acres he grew in 1999. Back then, quota cuts limited the amount of tobacco he could grow. Now, without the production restraints of the quota system, Vickers is able to contract tobacco with three companies that buy his leaf crop. These companies include U.S. Tobacco Cooperative (formerly known as Stabilization), U.S. Growers Direct and Alliance One.

His latest tobacco innovation is a labor saving cleaning and baling system. In this system, cured tobacco is hauled in boxes to a central location where it is cleaned, graded and baled, while newly harvested green or uncured tobacco is put into the empty boxes and hauled to the curing barns.

Vickers was born into a longtime farming family. His dad collected turpentine from pine trees. For many years, the farm relied on hogs to pay bills. "We didn't have to wonder what we would be doing on Mondays because we knew we would be hauling hogs to market that day," he recalls.

His first farm job as a five-year-old was driving a tobacco harvester. He says, "I could drive it, but couldn't turn it around. It was a two-story stack harvester. Then, when I was seven or eight years old, feeding hogs was my main farm job."

"I have been farming all my life with my father, grandfather and brother," he says. "As I got older, my brother and I started farming together on our own while still helping our father. In 1994, our father retired and sold us the family farm."

He has been active in several community and farm organizations. As chief of the East Berrien Volunteer Fire Dept., he has put in long hours fighting forest and swamp fires in nearby counties. He has been president of the Berrien County Chamber of Commerce. He also chairs the Berrien County Tax Assessors Board where he helps set property values. "It's a thankless job, but somebody's got to do it," he adds.

In addition, Vickers is a member of Riverside Baptist Church. He has been named Agribusinessman of the Year and his family was named Farm Family of the Year by Berrien County's Chamber of Commerce. His family was also selected as the Berrien County Farm Bureau Family of the Year. He has been active in the Berrien County Young Farmers Association. He serves on the board of the Alapaha Soil & Water Conservation District. He has taken part in the Philip Morris Agricultural Leadership

Development Program and was named as a Philip Morris Tobacco Farmer of the Year for Georgia. He has also served on the board and as president of the Georgia Tobacco Growers Association. In addition, he enjoys hunting turkeys and is a member of the National Wild Turkey Federation. He and his family also support local 4-H and FFA livestock shows.

His wife Judy, a teacher at Berrien Middle School, has taught seventh grade for 30 years. She was named Teacher of the Year four times. She has been selected for Who's Who Among America's Teachers six times. She teaches Sunday school at their church and is a member of the Georgia Association of Educators and the National Education Association. Judy spends her spare time filling out paperwork for the farm.

Carlos and Judy have no children but are close to their nieces and nephews. "Our family has worked together to make this farm work," says Carlos. "We are blessed to have them because they know what to do and when to do it."

"Farming has been a good life for me," says Vickers. "And I'm open to wherever the Good Lord leads us in our next farming venture. Maybe Judy will come up with another crop for us to grow."

Steve Brown with the Georgia Cooperative Extension Service is state coordinator of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Vickers was nominated for the award by Tim Flanders, Extension agent in Berrien County.

As the Georgia state winner, Vickers 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 awards for the 22nd consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$844,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from Georgia include: Timothy McMillian of Enigma, 1990; Bud Butcher of Senoia, 1991; James Lee Adams of Camilla, 1992; John Morgan of Mystic, 1993; Alan Verner of Rutledge, 1994; Donnie Smith of Willacoochee, 1995; Armond Morris of Ocilla, 1996; Thomas Coleman, Jr. of Hartsfield, 1997; Glenn Heard of Bainbridge, 1998; Bob McLendon of Leary, 1999; James Lee Adams of Camilla, 2000;

Daniel Johnson of Alma, 2001; Armond Morris of Ocilla, 2002; Jim Donaldson of Metter, 2003; Joe Boddiford of Sylvania, 2004; Jimmy Webb of Leary, 2005; Gary Paulk of Wray, 2006; Daniel Johnson of Alma, 2007; Wayne McKinnon of Douglas, 2008; Bill Brim of Tifton, 2009; and Robert Dasher of Glenville, 2010.

Georgia has had three overall winners, James Lee Adams of Camilla in 2000, Armond Morris of Ocilla in 2002 and Robert Dasher of Glenville in 2010.

Vickers' farm, along with the farms of the other eight state finalists, will be visited by a distinguished panel of judges during the week of Aug. 1-5. The judges for this year include Jim Bone, a retired manager of field development for DuPont Crop Protection from Valdosta, Ga.; Charles Snipes, a retired Mississippi Extension weed scientist who is president and research scientist with Stoneville R&D, Inc., from Greenville, Miss.; and John McKissick, longtime University of Georgia Extension ag economist from Athens, Ga.

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Note to media: The Vickers farm will be visited by the judges on Aug. 5 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The farm is located on Vickers Farm Rd., off Hwy. 135 east of Nashville, Ga. If you would like to visit the farm during the final two hours of judging, please call Janie Batson at 704-788-7026, or contact her by e-mail at jbbatson@ctc.net, or contact Vickers by calling 229-543-1630.