

Swisher Sunbelt Expo

Southeastern Farmer of the Year 2021

News Release
Contact: Becca Turner
(229) 985-1968 x2228
Email: becca@sunbeltexpo.com

For Immediate Release

[Moultrie, GA]—Robert “Bob” Martin Hall has been selected as the 2021 Swisher Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year.

Nestled in the hilly Piedmont region of York, South Carolina is Bush-N-Vine Farm, a fruit and vegetable-growing enterprise owned and operated by Robert “Bob” Martin Hall. His career began forty-one years ago on land that’s been in his family for a century and a half.

Hall said, “My early love of gardening came from having spent much of my childhood helping my grandfather with his peach orchard and helping my father survey land. A couple of my uncles, one of whom ran a truck farm with peaches and tomatoes, were also great mentors.”

After graduating from high school in 1976, Hall enrolled at Clemson University to study horticulture and obtained his B.S. degree in 1980. Meanwhile two cousins, who were sisters, decided to commit the future of their father’s farm to agriculture. Hall’s desire to grow crops and directly market fresh fruits and vegetables was the fortunate link to their wish, one that allowed him to begin farming the family land again.

He remembered, “We started Bush-N-Vine Farm then with seventy-five acres and converted the old 1930s peach packing shed into our retail market stand in York which, over the years, has served us well.”

From the 1960s on, after the initial shipping business faded away, the Hall family shifted focus to roadside market sales. Living within an hour’s drive of Charlotte, NC, what had been an exclusively agricultural community for most of the twentieth century gradually became a suburban one. In its unique setting, Bush-N-Vine Farm has developed into an agricultural oasis. It’s also become a destination

point for visitors to enjoy a day in beautiful rural surroundings and sample the farm's tasty bounty.

Bush-N-Vine Farm's land under cultivation has doubled since the early 1980s and now supports three direct marketing fruit stands: the large main one in York is open year round, and the ones in Rock Hill and Lake Wylie are seasonal. Produce is grown in three ways: in open fields, high tunnels, and greenhouses. On the fruit production side, strawberries have been the farm's core crop with 10 irrigated acres yielding 17,500 lbs./acre, 15 irrigated acres of peaches yielding 320–400 bushels/acre, 8 acres of cantaloupe and melons yielding 18,000 lbs./acre, 3 acres of blackberries yielding 9,000–10,000 lbs./acre, 3 acres of blueberries yielding 8,000 lbs./acre.

Vegetables grown at Bush-N-Vine Farm include 10 acres of sweet corn yielding 500 dozen ears/acre and 25 acres of a wide variety of vegetables whose yields vary depending on the crop. These include crowder peas, sugar snap peas, butter peas, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, kale, kohlrabi, cilantro, arugula, summer squash, lima beans, and tomatoes. Fresh market production takes place on 25 acres; high tunnel production accounts for 130,680 square feet housed in fourteen 25' x 400' structures for all-season crops. Greenhouse production, including newly added hydroponic tomatoes, accounts for 44,850 square feet and continues to expand.

Bush-N-Vine is a collective family effort. Bob Hall has been married to Susan Templeton Hall for thirty-seven years, and they have five children—Sam, Benjamin, Elizabeth Martin, Ruth Anne Melchers, and Mary McKay—and thirteen grandchildren. Wife Susan is the Secretary/Treasurer. As Hall said, "I call her my CFO because she holds my feet to the fire when it comes to expenses. She has all the talent and qualities for managing the business side of things so that I can concentrate on growing things."

Susan is a long-term member of the York County Farm Bureau and an active member of the Women in the Church group at Filbert Presbyterian Church. She said, "I've loved being able to raise our children on the farm. Each one took part in its day-to-day activities and chores. We endeavor to treat our full-time and H2A program workers like family too so that everyone has a sense of fulfillment."

Hall has been a member of the York County Farm Bureau for forty years, a board member of the South Carolina Farm Bureau since 2010, and currently serves on its Labor Committee. He's a member of Certified South Carolina Grown, South

Carolina Agri-Tourism Association, and South Carolina Specialty Crop Association. He's also FSMA (Food Safety Modernization Act) certified.

In the last decade, son Sam and his wife, Lindsey, and their three children have been living full time on the farm. A 2010 graduate of Clemson's Agriculture Economics program, Sam wears a lot of hats in his full-time job at Bush-N-Vine Farm.

He said, "I grew up helping my dad and realized from a very early age that I wanted to be a farmer. I can't imagine doing anything else. I also love seeing Lindsey turn into a country girl and raising our little ones here. She maintains our Facebook page and other social media marketing efforts as well."

Sam is in charge of sales, the sales force, and marketing. He also manages the CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program that's seen an explosion in growth from 200 to 2500 shares, much of that happening in recent years with the rise of the farm-to-table food movement. Though most of the retail sales are direct, Bush-N-Vine sells on a wholesale basis to some other farms and restaurants.

To the main York store location, built in 2014, the family has added picnic tables, swings, rocking chairs, a one-mile hiking trail through meadows and a cow pasture, and even an old John Deere G2 cylinder tractor.

Hall said, "It's our main retail outlet and serves as a place for our workers to eat and use as a break area. We conduct seasonal farm tours there for senior and school groups. We also like to feature live music for our customers to enjoy while they're nibbling on strawberry ice cream, eating fresh watermelon, or enjoying a hay ride."

To maintain an eco-healthy, productive farm Hall implements crop rotation for strawberries. He first plants peas in the summer of the first year and oats and clover over the fall and spring. Then he plants strawberries the following fall.

Hall said, "By keeping something growing on the land we reduce soil erosion and help protect the environment. We follow all pesticide record keeping laws and regulations and try to limit pesticide applications. We also implement several bio-controls, including a beneficial mite that helps reduce the damage from a destructive spider mite. We've done other beneficial insect releases as well and utilize organic matter by windrowing it and then mulching the rows in between our

strawberry rows.” He added, “We strive to be good stewards of our resources and leave them better than when we started.”

Bush-N-Vine has operational goals of growing their CSA shares, increasing remote irrigation monitoring, continuing to create special incentives for their crew leaders, and recognizing the accomplishments of all their employees. They’ve recently had great success in using the Square app to track individual crop expenses and production costs. They’ve also gone from 9600 to 36,000 square feet of greenhouse space. The farm purchased an Oxbo bean harvester that has fostered expanded bean production.

Hall said, “We are trying blueberries in the greenhouses for the first time and increasing our tomato production in this area in order to free up space to grow more strawberries in the high tunnels. We’ve begun contract growing a specialty hot pepper on five acres as well.”

Overcoming the traditional challenges of weather is part of the farming game. Hall commented, “We had two very hard years in 2017 and 2018 with no peach crop due to late frost. Thankfully, because we are so diversified, we were able to overcome this natural disaster. There are always potential weather and disease issues. During droughts, we irrigate of course, but it’s not like the Lord’s rain.”

Labor issues due to changes in the H2A program have also been problematic. Hall said, “We are blessed to have several Hispanic workers who live locally and work for us year-round. By building relationships with them, we’ve been able to connect with some of their family and friends who’ve come to work for us through the H2A program. All our employees are critical to the survival of our farm.”

When Bob and Susan Hall take a rare work break, it may be a brief getaway to a B&B in the nearby mountains. He observed, “It’s good once in a while to enjoy some cool mountain air and not have to cook meals and wash dishes. Recharging the batteries can be a positive thing so we can get back to, and appreciate even more, the place where our hearts, minds, and souls belong.”

Bob Hall was nominated as South Carolina Farmer of the Year by Philip “Andy” Rollins, Upstate South Carolina Commercial Fruit & Vegetable Agent at Clemson University. Andy observed, “I’ve worked with Bob on many research projects and have been most impressed with his innovative spirit, his eagerness to try new things. He’s always experimenting with different crops and growing times, pushing the limits where many others would give up. When faced with adversity, he just

tries harder. Bob's strong faith is also an inspiration to me personally, along with his willingness to generously share his vast, hard-earned knowledge with others in the agricultural community."

The new Farmer of the Year was selected for the honor by three judges who visited his farm and the farms of the other state winners the week of August 16–20. The judging panel included Joe West, retired Assistant Dean, Tifton, Georgia campus of the University of Georgia, College of Agriculture Environmental Sciences; David Wildy, Manila, Arkansas, the overall winner of the award in 2016; and Cary Lightsey, Lake Wales, Florida, the overall winner of the award in 2009.

Head judge Cary Lightsey commented, "Bob Hall and Bush-N-Vine Farms represent exactly what the competition is all about. Bob Hall covered all the different judged categories with flying colors. He is a humble man when it comes to his many accomplishments, but he has great vision for the future of his family and business. He also goes out of his way to help his fellow farmers. We thoroughly enjoyed visiting all of the state winners. It was an extremely difficult decision to choose one, as all ten 2021 state winners are outstanding."

This is the thirty-first year for the Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. It recognizes excellence in agricultural production and farm management, along with leadership in farm and community organizations. The award also honors family contributions in producing safe and abundant supplies of food, fiber, and shelter products.

Ron Carroll, Vice President Marketing Operations Fat Lip Brands with Swisher, praised Hall for his farming accomplishments. "Farming on land that has been in his family for over a century and a half, Bob Hall represents exactly what the American farmer is all about. He exemplifies the traditions, values, and determination associated with the many responsibilities of being a steward of the land. The characteristics of farmers include being innovators, risk takers, pioneers, environmentalist, problem solvers, as well as agricultural and industry leaders in their community, state, nationally, and internationally. Bob, Susan, Sam and their entire team check all of those boxes."

As the Southeastern Farmer of the Year, Hall will receive a \$15,000 cash award plus \$2,500 as a state winner from Swisher. He will also receive the use of a Massey Ferguson tractor for a year from Massey Ferguson North America, a Columbia jacket from Ivey's Outdoor and Farm Supply, a smoker-grill from Hays

LTI, a Henry Golden Boy “American Farmer” Tribute Edition rifle from Reinke Irrigation and an additional \$500 charitable donation from Syngenta.

Each state winner receives a \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo from Swisher, a \$500 donation to their charity of choice from Syngenta, a Columbia vest from Ivey’s Outdoor and Farm Supply, and a commemorative shovel from the Moultrie Colquitt Co. Chamber of Commerce.

The other state winners this year include: Thomas Ellis of Fort Deposit, AL; Jamie Anderson of Lonoke, AR; Raymond R. “Rick” Roth, Jr. of Belle Glade, FL; Lee Nunn of Madison, GA; Stephen J. Kelley of Bardwell, KY; Joe Edmondson of Vardaman, MS; James L. “Cookie” Lamb of Clinton, NC; Jay Yeargin of Greenfield, TN; and Charles Edwin “CJ” Isbell of Rockville, VA.

