

Swisher/Sunbelt Ag Expo

Southeastern Farmer of the Year

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

For Immediate Release

ROBERT E. SAUNDERS NAMED 2022 VIRGINIA FARMER OF THE YEAR

In a reflective mood Robert Saunders, of Saunders Brothers, Inc. in Piney River, Virginia, quoted Mark Twain's famous advice, "Always do what is right. It will gratify half of mankind and astound the other."

Growing up on a family farm as one of seven brothers was full of adventures that ran the gamut from fun to frightening. He remembered a few: "Work was part of life whether you liked it or not, no matter how late you stayed out the previous night. Dinner was often at the picnic table with extra seats for friends, coworkers, and visitors. Cattle only find a hole in the fence when it is dark and raining."

"As children," Saunders recalled, "my six brothers and I composed the workforce on the farm. We picked peaches, potted plants, loaded trucks, dug ditches, got up hay, fed and worked cattle, and even milked a Guernsey cow daily during elementary and middle school."

That kind of training and discipline has a long history going back to 1915 when Robert's grandfather, Sam, and four of his brothers formed a partnership to share the money they made trapping rabbits. During the Great Depression three of the brothers kept up the farm partnership with the assistance of dedicated helpers and sharecroppers. Sam's son, Paul Saunders, propagated his first boxwood in the spring of 1947. When 25 of the 77 slips took root, he was encouraged to grow the small nursery while working full-time as a land surveyor.

Forty years later, his son, Robert, was an avid engineering student at Virginia Tech, graduating in 1986 with a BS in Agricultural Engineering. He married his college sweetheart, Patricia (Pat), in 1987 and noted, "That's the smartest decision I ever made in my life." She graduated from Virginia Tech the same year with a degree in Interior Design and later obtained her teaching certificate from Lynchburg College.

When Saunders returned to the farm, the nursery was beginning to grow, and he spent most days building greenhouses, designing and building irrigation systems and

reservoirs, potting, managing crews, and loading trucks. His wife Pat taught art in the public schools and cared for their growing family of three daughters and two sons who are now grown: Annie Saunders Burnett, 28; Alexandra (Alex) Saunders Zarate, 27; Robert Price (Price) Saunders, 23; Patrick Edmund Saunders, 22; and Victoria Carol Saunders, 21. Annie now runs the Farm Market at Saunders Brothers, Inc., and Price is going through the farm's 40-week apprentice program to experience and learn about each area/component of the business first-hand before choosing a slot that best suits his innate skills and talents.

Eventually Robert took over sales and oversaw the expansion of the sales team and shipping department to match growing inventory. He remained the farm's sales and shipping manager for nearly 25 years, while fulfilling his passion as its resident engineer. Now serving as General Manager, Saunders said, "I do not consider myself a typical horticulturist or orchardist. I am a problem-solving farmer, working alongside my three brothers, two children, three nephews, a highly motivated management team, and an incredibly dedicated group of employees."

Saunders began his first year of farming with 542 acres of owned land. Today the total acreage operated is 3,192 with 91 acres rented and 3168 owned. Crop yields are as follows: woody ornamentals (container grown): 23 acres yielding 16,000 plants/acre; 7 acres of annuals/perennials yielding 167,000 plants/acre; 180 acres of field ornamentals yielding 430 plants/acre; 6 acres of grafted trees yielding 5200 plants/acre; 66 acres of peaches and nectarines yielding 530 bushels/acre; and 95 acres of apples and Asian pears yielding 695 bushels/acre.

Saunders Brothers, Inc. markets its products in both the wholesale and retail areas. Its local and regional sales staff services a total of about 600 active wholesale customers, primarily along the east coast from North Carolina to Massachusetts. Ornamental nursery customers include independent garden centers, landscapers, and re-wholesalers. The farm produces annuals, boxwood, edibles, fall annuals, ferns, grasses, groundcovers, perennials, roses, shrubs, and trees. Wholesale fruit is sold to the Farm Market, local grocers, roadside truck markets, and large wholesale fruit packers. Fruit trees are contract-grown and primarily sold to orchardists for fruit production.

Retail marketing is done at the Farm Market, located in the rustic 1930s peach packing shed built by Robert Saunders' grandfather. On offer are peaches, nectarines, donut peaches, apples, sweet cherries, and Asian pears. Christmas wreaths and swags are assembled on the farm and are extremely popular. There's a 'you-pick' experience with cherries and pumpkins, along with choose-and-cut Christmas trees. The Farm Market also carries regionally produced items like jams, jellies, salsas, and ciders.

Saunders Brothers, Inc. has three comprehensive websites that keep their customers up to date on plants and fruit products, family and farm information, and special events. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram promote products and

build brand and farm awareness. Saunders Brothers, Inc. also maintains well-established advertising relationships with local media outlets.

Agritourism is an undertaking that the Farm Market uses to help connect customers with the farm. Events include Kids on the Farm days, live music from local musicians on Saturdays, Apple Butter Making festival, and Christmas at the Farm Market. Additional educational and recreational events include farm animal day, baking contests, peach canning, Native American artifact shows, beef/pork sampling, and arts and crafts shows featuring local artists.

In the area of conservation, Saunders Brothers, Inc. works closely with the University of Florida Environmental Horticulture Department. The farm was the first container nursery in the US to develop and implement new technology for irrigating container crops, based on determining the evapotranspiration (ET) of the plants daily, then applying only the needed amount of water to replace what plants use/lose. The farm was able to reduce water usage in some container crops by 50 percent or over 100 million gallons annually

Saunders also practices plastic recycling, plants cover crops in fields and orchards, applies rice hulls on the surface of the soil in many of the container plants, builds beds on the contour, plants grasses between raised beds and in waterways, and is moving to paper and bio-degradable products in his Farm Market.

Another important aspect of the operation is Saunders Genetics LLC (NewGen Boxwood®), a wholly owned research and development subsidiary founded in 2019 that brings superior boxwood selections to a broader market. It was launched largely in response to the Boxwood Blight that entered the US Atlantic region from Europe in 2011. A primary goal of Saunders Genetics LLC and NewGen® is to introduce better boxwood to the market and reduce the use of pesticides needed to combat disease and insects.

On the issue of labor availability, Robert commented, "Like most farms, we've experienced lack of labor issues. Over twenty years ago we began using the H2A program and are now employing around 100 H2A full-time workers and 60 local full-time workers. We hire 25 to 30 part-time people seasonally."

Saunders noted, "In recent months we've gotten through the challenges presented by the economy and Covid, but one thing completely out of our control in terms of cost-driving factors is weather. Hail, frost, or rain conditions can dictate product changes, shipping decisions, and affect inventory shelf life. So you have to be fluid at all times and have a backup plan ready to respond to these events." He added, "That's when the engineer side of me kicks into gear and sees a problem-solving opportunity. Just like in football, it's something to tackle head-on with experience, resilience, and hopefully grace."

And speaking of football, Saunders is a huge Virginia Tech Hokies fan and makes time to attend home games in the fall and a few away games when possible. Robert and Pat also enjoy some weekend getaways at a cabin they built in recent years that's only ten miles from home. He said, "There's no cell coverage, so that makes it my happy place."

One week a year a family get-together with Pat's relatives take place at Ocean Isle, North Carolina, where everyone spends some beach time. Saunders added, "Once a year in February Pat and I join a small group of friends for a trip to a tranquil resort in Jamaica where we can totally kick back and relax. Having a healthy balance between work and down time is something we encourage with all our employees. Putting family first is always the priority."

Saunders has been an active member with Virginia 4-H, Virginia Nursery and Landscape Association, his local church, Nelson County Habitat for Humanity, Little League Softball, Baseball, and Basketball, and local mission groups. Pat Saunders has been active as a church pianist and choir member, children's choir leader, and Sunday school teacher. She has also contributed her time and talent to Nelson County Habitat of Humanity, West Virginia 4-H, Virginia Art Education, and the National Art Association.

Saunders said, "Today my brothers, sisters-in-law, nephews, son, and daughter, along with a dedicated family of employees, make up the Saunders Family. And I'm still blessed as General Manager to be able to apply my love of engineering to our ever-expanding business. Most importantly, we are and will always be rooted in the principles of honesty, morality, and integrity, a fact that continues to gratify most and astound a few."

Robert Saunders was nominated for Virginia Farmer of the Year 2022 by Grace Monger, Virginia Tech Agriculture & Natural Resources Extension Agent, Nelson County. She said, "Environmental stewardship and advancing agricultural technology have always been at the forefront of the Saunders Farm as it evolved from a subsistence farm to the large-scale, diverse horticultural operation of today. Employees are treated as family members, which creates a uniquely supportive workplace culture. Robert knows the importance of organizing relief efforts in catastrophic years and of joyfully greeting guests and customers to the farm market. The collaborative and community-based attitude of Robert and his family toward farming is at the heart of his success."

A distinguished panel of judges will visit Robert Saunders, along with the other nine state winners via zoom at a later date this summer. The judges include John McKissick, long-time University of Georgia agricultural economist at Athens, Georgia; David Wildy, Manila, Arkansas, the overall winner of the award in 2016; and Joe West, Tifton,

Georgia, retired dairy scientist and assistant Dean of the University of Georgia Tifton Campus.