

Swisher/Sunbelt Ag Expo

Southeastern Farmer of the Year

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For Immediate Release

ROBERT E. SAUNDERS NAMED 2022 SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR

[Moultrie, GA]—Robert E. Saunders, a multi-generational farmer from Piney River, Virginia, who grows woody ornamentals, annuals, perennials, field ornamentals, grafted trees, peaches, nectarines, apples, and Asian pears, has been selected as the overall winner of the Swisher/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award for 2022.

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. Propagating boxwood was our job and preparing the cuttings in the living room at home was acceptable. 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. I still have my first paycheck for \$13.80 from the summer of 1968 when I was four years old. 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 from a family of eleven children formed a partnership to share the money they made trapping rabbits. During the Great Depression three of the brothers managed to keep 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, it only had about 35 greenhouses, 30 employees, 100 head of cattle, and fruit was the lead crop. 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 historic peach packing shed built in the 1930s by Robert Saunders' grandfather. The shop is open six days a week from mid-April until late December and retains its original rustic character and charm.

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.

The farm participates in several industry trade shows for key sales and marketing opportunities. Staff members also do guest speaking engagements at various events including field days, customer seminars, open houses, garden clubs, labor conferences, and industry events both state-wide and nationally.

Saunders Brothers, Inc. has three comprehensive, informative websites that keep their customers and others up to date on plants and fruit products, family and farm information, and special events. They use social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram to promote products and build brand and farm awareness. Saunders Brothers, Inc. also maintains well-established relationships with local media outlets, including television stations and newspapers to advertise products and special events on the farm.

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 on an autumn Saturday, and the annual 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. Fertilizer use also decreased by up to one-third in some crops and herbicides have been more effective. Pesticide usage and crop losses have also decreased.

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. This enterprise was

launched largely in response to the Boxwood Blight that entered the US Atlantic region from Europe in 2011 and devastated many historic boxwood landscapes.

In the 1990s, Paul Saunders had begun the National Boxwood Trials, a research project aimed at collecting new cultivars and testing them for garden performance. Saunders Brothers, Inc. thus developed over time an extensive boxwood collection of nearly 150 healthy varieties. A primary goal of Saunders Genetics LLC and NewGen® is to introduce better boxwood to the market and to reduce the use of pesticides needed to combat disease and insects. "Sales of NewGen® Boxwood," Saunders noted, "should double with more than 400,000 containerized and field-grown boxwood expected to finish in 2022."

On the issue of labor availability, Robert commented, "Like most farms, we've experienced issues of available labor. 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 as well. We've also made a concerted effort the last few years to improve worker ergonomics, designing and constructing a new plant potting facility that allows our employees to stand upright and under a roof when potting plants. Thus output, plant quality, and working conditions have greatly improved."

As with the majority of farmers, weather is always one of the critical cost-driving factors. 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 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. He also enjoys yard mowing as a kind of motion therapy and doing handiwork around the farm. 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 there's a family get-together with Pat's relatives at Ocean Isle, North Carolina, where everyone enjoys 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. She retired from teaching and has opened an art studio in Saunders Brothers original office where she does freelance painting projects for clients.

In a reflective mood, Robert Saunders quoted Mark Twain's famous advice: "Always do what is right. It will gratify half of mankind and astound the other." He continued, "Today my brothers (Tom, container production, Bennett, NewGen Boxwood and Jim, Human Resources), sisters-in-law, nephews, son, and daughter, along with a dedicated family of employees, make up the Saunders Family. Pat and I are thrilled that we now have a fifth generation with the arrival of a grandson, age 3, and a granddaughter who was born in the spring of this year. Some things haven't changed though, like living in the same house I grew up in and never receiving a paycheck from anyone who wasn't a Saunders. 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. The Saunders family has also been faithful supporters of local community activities and hosted many 4-H camps before there was a 4-H educational center."

She added, "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."

The new Farmer of the Year was selected for the honor by three judges. This year's judging tour of all ten state farmers of the year took place virtually beginning in August 2022. Judges included 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.

Chief judge David Wildy said, "The 2022 State Farmers of the Year are certainly what I would describe as Excellence in Agriculture. They are a leading group of farmers and businessmen that represented their states with upmost distinction and excellence.

"No matter the difficulty we are requested to choose an overall winner. This year Robert Saunders of Saunders Brothers, Inc. representing the State of Virginia is you overall winner. Without question Robert represents what this program is all about. He and his operation checked all the boxes and then some. This family operation has developed a tremendous business plan including succession plans and standard operating procedures. When the going gets tough they have the processes in place to make the right decisions.

"Without a doubt Robert has surrounded himself with what it takes to make his family business successful and sustainable in the years to come."

This is the thirty-second 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 of Smokeless Marketing, Swisher, commented, "Farming on land that has been in his family for over a century, Robert Saunders 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, environmentalists, problem solvers, as well as agricultural and industry leaders in their community, state, nationally, and internationally. Robert, Pat, and their entire team check all of those boxes."

As the STATE winner of the Swisher/Sunbelt Ag Expo award, Robert Saunders will receive a \$2,500 cash award and an expense-paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo from Swisher International of Jacksonville, Florida. A vest from the Sunbelt Ag Expo will be given to each state winner and nominator. Syngenta will donate \$500 to the state winner's charity of choice. The Moultrie Colquitt Co. Chamber of Commerce will give each state winner a local keepsake.

As the new Southeastern Farmer of the Year, Saunders will receive the \$15,000 cash prize awarded to the overall winner by Swisher. Massey Ferguson North America will provide each state winner with a gift package and the overall winner with the use of a Massey Ferguson tractor for a year or 250 hours (whichever comes first). A jacket from the Sunbelt Ag Expo will be given to the overall winner. Syngenta will provide an additional \$500 donation to the charity of choice for the overall winner who will also

receive a Hays LTI Smoker/Grill. In addition, the overall winner will receive a Henry Repeating Arms American Farmer Tribute Edition rifle from Reinke Irrigation.

Swisher and the Sunbelt Ag Expo are sponsoring the Southeastern Farmer of the Year awards for the 32nd consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$1,244,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from Virginia include: Nelson Gardner of Bridgewater, 1990; Russell Inskeep of Culpepper, 1991; Harry Bennett of Covington, 1992; Hilton Hudson of Alton, 1993; Buck McCann of Carson, 1994; George M. Ashman, Jr. of Amelia, 1995; Bill Blalock of Baskerville, 1996; G. H. Peery III of Ceres, 1997; James Bennett of Red House, 1998; Ernest Copenhaver of Meadowview, 1999; John Davis of Port Royal, 2000; James Huffard III of Crockett, 2001; J. Hudson Reese of Scottsburg, 2002; Charles Parkerson of Suffolk, 2003; Lance Everett of Stony Creek, 2004; Monk Sanford of Orange, 2005; Paul House of Nokesville, 2006; Steve Berryman of Surry, 2007; Tim Sutphin of Dublin, 2008; Billy Bain of Dinwiddie, 2009; Wallick Harding of Jetersville, 2010; Donald Horsley of Virginia Beach, 2011; Maxwell Watkins of Sutherland, 2012; Lin Jones of New Canton, 2013; Robert T. "Tom" Nixon II of Rapidan, 2014; Donald Turner of North Dinwiddie, 2015; Tyler Wegmeyer of Hamilton, 2016; and Robert Mills, Jr., of Callands, 2017; Paul Rogers, Jr. of Wakefield, 2018, and Michael H. McDowell of Vernon Hill, 2019; Charles Edwin Isbell, Jr. of Rockville, 2020.