



Sunbelt Ag Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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For Immediate Release

GARY T. CECIL NAMED 2023 KENTUCKY FARMER OF THE YEAR

Gary Cecil, of Owensboro, began his 50-year farming career by renting ten acres of tobacco land and hauling hay for area farmers and ear corn to local elevators. Today he operates 2,414 acres, 180 of which are owned and 2,234 are rented on which he grows watermelon, corn, soybeans, mixed vegetables, and greenhouse flowers.

The Cecil family owns another business enterprise, Cecil Spread Service, LLC, that dates back to the 1980s. Cecil said, "Throughout southern Indiana and western and central Kentucky we spread lime, fertilizer, litter, and compost and apply crop protectants through our custom spray service. We spread approximately 55,000 tons of lime, 48,000 acres of fertilizer, and 40,000 tons of litter and compost annually. We now operate seven terra-gators and a sprayer with precision technologies that assist us in efficiency and accuracy."

Cecil recalled, "I started out wanting to be a computer programmer and went to ITT for a year and took a few college courses in that field. But when I had the chance to turn my hand to farming, I took it." He added, "My wife, Imelda, and I were high school sweethearts and got married in 1974. She chose to go back to college years ago after we had our three children, who are now adults: Ryan Cecil, 46, Suzanne Cecil White, 43, and Katie Cecil, 37."

Imelda became a nurse and worked in endoscopy for a large part of her career at Owensboro Health. Her choice significantly improved circumstances for the family by providing backup financial security and health insurance. Her commitment to her profession and to her family is an integral part of the farm's growth and success over the decades. The Cecil's are also lifelong members of St. Alphonsus Catholic Church in Owensboro.

Their children have all been participants in the Kentucky Agricultural Leadership Program, and today they are deeply involved in Cecil Farms Produce, LLC. Son Ryan is a main partner and a key person in production and management of all crops as well as the spreader service. Daughter Suzanne returned to the operation in 2011 with the intention of helping with bookkeeping and payroll of 75+ employees at the time.

Cecil said, "Suzanne began learning about the entire operation, started a fruits and vegetable home delivery subscription program, developed our farmer's market presence, helped with community relations, and managed all shipping operation for the commercial watermelons.



She's worked with local distributors, become our food safety audit coordinator, and developed, with her husband, Mack, our event venue (known as White Chateau at Cecil Farms), farm stand/store, spring greenhouse production, and community education."

He noted, "Daughter Katie also came back home to help manage the produce packing and distribution, spring greenhouse production, and fresh cut flower production, as well as creating and designing event florals and educational outreach workshops."

Crop yields for Cecil Farms Produce, LLC are as follows: 450 acres of watermelons yielding 51,200 lbs/acre; 1,083 acres of corn yielding 195 bushels/acre; 882 acres of soybeans yielding 65 bushels/acre; 20 acres of mixed vegetables yielding 1,500 boxes of tomatoes and 2,000 boxes of bell peppers; and 43,000 square feet of greenhouse flowers yielding 10,000 bedding plants, ferns, and mixed baskets. Cecil currently employs 21 H2A workers and has used this program for nearly three decades.

Their 500 acres of fruits and vegetables are marketed in a variety of ways. Locally they operate www.ShopCecilFarms.com, market through a seasonal retail farm store and greenhouse, a large on-farm spring market of 70+ vendors, regional farmers markets, area farm markets, local health food stores, restaurants, and schools. Wholesale products are sold through a local distributor serving Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky. Commercial watermelon crops are marketed through a national brand that places them in major grocery chains across the country from July through September.

Cecil noted, "Our watermelon crop uses 900 hives of bees to pollinate each season. Working with our local beekeeper, we're able to market honey year round as well. We market our grain to local hog operations and our fresh cut flowers are sold through our www.ShopCecilFarm.com website, social media, and through bookings at our venue, White Chateau at Cecil Farms. Our multi-purpose cooler/grow-room addition is helping expand floral offerings, winter plant, and flower production, and vegetable storage."

When their beautiful event venue opened four years ago, the vision was to connect more consumers with a modern-day working farm. Several annual events throughout the year draw crowds of hundreds to thousands including Farm to Table Dinner, Spring Market, Women's FUEL Conference, Breakfast with Santa, Candlelit Symphony, and Holiday Flora Workshops. It's also a sought-after location for weddings and parties.

In addition, the Cecil's offer an Airbnb Farmhouse rental that attracts visitors from all over the US and Canada. Cecil said, "We've learned that people are drawn from larger cities to the peaceful, quiet escape of our rolling hills' countryside. It's been a great pairing with the entire operation and the vision of our farm to connect consumers to agriculture."

The Cecil's work year-round with local boys and girls clubs, having them grow and produce their own garden on the farm. They've sponsored programs such as the Salvation Army Summer Camp as well. And they cultivate and maintain relationships with local schools and restaurants to expand awareness and use of locally produced products.



In order to protect and preserve the soil, Cecil has used cover crops most of his farming career in the off season. Rye, wheat, clover, rye grass, rapeseed/canola area a few examples of the types planted. Cecil said, "We use the most up-to-date equipment and technologies on our equipment for spreading and spraying to improve accuracy of product and prevent over fertilization of the soil. Working with a crop consultant and field scout keeps the operation on top of the best practices of timely application and creates a proactive approach to crop and soil health. We also use biologicals and other micronutrients and closely monitor everything to contribute to optimum soil and conservation of resources."

On the county level, Cecil has been a past president of and a current board member of Daviess County Farm Bureau; committee chairman of Daviess County Farm Bureau Policy Development Committee; member of Daviess County Farm Bureau Insurance Service Committee; member of Daviess County Farm Bureau Tobacco Commodity Committee, former member of the Soil Conservation Board; present member of his church's finance committee, past board member and present Ag Task Force member of the Greater Owensboro Chamber of Commerce. On the state level, Cecil is a past member of the Kentucky Farm Bureau Insurance Advisory Committee, a past member of the Governor's Board, Phase II of the Tobacco Settlement. On the national level, he is a past representative for Kentucky on the United States Potato Board.

As for challenges that are part and parcel of agriculture, Cecil said, "Fruit and vegetable production are very labor intensive. We went through many years of excessive turnover in employees, making it difficult to complete jobs or expand our operation." His solution was to turn, 28 years ago, to the H2A program of bringing in seasonal workers. He observed, "This reliable resource transformed our farm; we've had more consistency than ever, and over half the workers we employ today have been with us since the beginning. This core group has helped to build our future team as well by recruiting and training additional, younger team members in their work. It's been vital to our growth and our operation's advancement."

While Cecil was a member of the US Potato Board for 20+ years, he got to travel all over the country for industry events. About the same time that Imelda retired from nursing several years ago, the Cecil's bought a lake house on nearby Rough River. The family tries to get away on weekends to enjoy swimming, water sports, and fishing together. In the winter they take a ski trip to New Mexico around the Christmas holidays. Cecil said, "Once a year Imelda and I spend a couple of weeks in Florida at Madera Beach. We have really good friends in the Ft. Myers area, fellow farmers who grow watermelons. Getting together and spending time with them, either on our farm or theirs, is always a joy."

One important lesson Cecil has learned from farming is perseverance. He said, "You've got to want it badly and truly enjoy it to make it your way of life. Passion is essential because when the hard times come, you might be tempted to walk away. But there's that ever renewing, pure satisfaction of watching crops get planted, grow to maturity, and get harvested. There's really no better feeling on earth."

Blessed with three adult children who are all gifted with some form of innovative thinking and diverse talents, Cecil reflected, "You need the perspective of youth to energize and grow your operation. And they have the capability and willingness to reinvent, change, and evolve as the



times dictate. They're open to implementing new ideas and enterprises, which is essential to the future viability of the farm."

Gary T. Cecil was nominated Kentucky Farmer of the Year by Scott Elliott, President of Daviess County Farm Bureau Board of Directors. He commented, "Gary is a person of integrity who has a strong work ethic that he and his wife have passed down to their children. The family works together as a unit, using each other's strengths to make Cecil Farms a successful, diversified farming operation."

He added, "Gary is an exceptional leader who gives unselfishly of his time to benefit agriculture, farmers, and his community. It's a privilege for me to nominate him for this well-deserved honor."

A distinguished panel of judges will visit Gary Cecil, along with the farms of the other nine state finalists, the week of August 14–18. The judges include David Wildy, Manila, Arkansas, the overall winner of the award in 2016; Joe West, retired Assistant Dean UGA Tifton Campus; and Darren Parker, Vice President, Massey Ferguson North America.