



Sunbelt Ag Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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For Immediate Release

BRAD O'NEAL NAMED 2023 SOUTH CAROLINA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Brad O'Neal is a minority owner in Coosaw Farms, which is located in Fairfax, South Carolina, and takes its name from the nearby Coosahatchie River.

O'Neal said, "My parents started the farm at a time with high interest rates and low commodity prices. My dad worked for years as a loan officer for the Federal Land Bank but started farming full time in 1983. My mother taught third grade at a local elementary school and worked in the farm office during the summers. They were able to build the foundation for what Coosaw Farms is today with grit and determination."

He added, "My first job was selling watermelons and cantaloupes at the only stoplight in Fairfax when I was six years old. My goal was to earn enough money to cover lunches for the upcoming school year. Then when my legs were strong enough to press the clutch on our old 4440 tractor, I pulled harvest wagons in the cantaloupe fields. When I was 16 years old, I became the manager of our packing house."

O'Neal went on to major in Agricultural and Applied Economics at Clemson University, where he graduated in 2000 with a BS degree. It was there he met his future wife, Christie, who earned her BS degree in Accounting. They were married in 2001 and have two daughters, Tyler, 20, and Sanders, 17, and a son, Gibson, 15. Christie is the Business Director of nearby Seaside Farm, which is run by her fifth-generation farming family.

With both sets of their parents coming from an agricultural background, Christie and Brad wanted to instill traditional values in their children. "Our children understand a job is a privilege that has to be earned" O'Neal said. "Christie and I discuss business in all its variables and scope. Our children have been exposed to the good times and bad times from both of our farms. We want the kids to see and experience other places and have other work opportunities before they commit to returning to Coosaw Farms. We see it as part of being well-rounded and well-informed individuals, and we don't want the kids to think they can just fall back on farming. Farming is a job you have to love."

When O'Neal started working full time at Coosaw Farms, it consisted of 1400 acres (745 rented and 655 owned) and has grown over the last 23 years to a total of 3300 acres (300 rented and 3000 owned). There are two local operations with two primary crops: watermelon and blueberries. Red seeded, red and yellow seedless, and red mini-seedless watermelons as well



as organic blueberries are grown on the St. Helena Island farm, while the Fairfax farm grows conventional blueberries, watermelons, blackberries (the third season for this relative newcomer), field corn, cotton, and sorghum.

Crop yields are as follows: 400 irrigated acres of watermelons yielding 65,000 lbs/acre; 130 irrigated acres of conventional blueberries yielding 12,000 lbs/acre; 80 irrigated acres of organic blueberries yielding 7500 lbs/acre; 10 irrigated acres of blackberries yielding 20,000 lbs/acre; 650 irrigated acres of field corn yielding 200 bushels/acre; 600 acres of cotton yielding 1100 lbs/acre; 200 acres of sorghum yielding 80 bushels/acre.

Employing approximately ten full-time employees, during peak harvest season Coosaw Farms hires around 300 people, including H2A workers. O'Neal commented, "Some of our full and part-time employees have been with us over fifteen years. They are like family members, with actual brothers, sons, uncles, and cousins working together here. It's my belief that there are no unimportant jobs because each step in the cycle of growing crops is critical and intertwined. Every person has a key role to play. We like to say that our number one crop is people. Our team loves Coosaw Farms, and we encourage creative thinking and positive input from everyone."

O'Neal makes a point of incorporating innovations in ergonomic aids for harvesting and packing. Continuous farm, field, and food safety training is also in place to ensure a team-based culture of safety and quality. All marketing of produce is done in house. O'Neal said, "We meet regularly with our customers to gauge their desires and tailor our produce to fit their needs. Food trends are always evolving, so we partner with retail stores to provide the end consumer with the premium-quality healthy and delicious produce they expect and deserve. What Coosaw Farms grows essentially sells itself."

Every cultivated acre of row crop land is strip-tilled to protect it from soil erosion. O'Neal added, "We use a cloud-based, remotely accessible system of moisture sensors to manage our irrigation and monitor soil temperature and the depth that fertilizer moves through it. This type of system enables us to deploy 'just the right amount' of water and fertilizer with benefits to both plant vigor and water conservation."

On Coosaw Farms there's a culture of old-fashioned thrift where the O'Neal's re-purpose and reuse whatever's possible, striving for near zero waste. The company has an active recycling program that includes plastics, metal, packaging, and office paper. Coosaw Farms carefully levels its fields to a degree plane before crop cultivation and follows with GPS technology to build and shape precise rows. This enables optimal drainage and the capability for rainwater recapture through channeled flow. Carefully planned networks of ditches and trenches capture water and establish reservoirs for holding that water throughout the year; that water is then used in frost protection, and irrigation.

Crop rotation helps suppress weeds, pathogens, and insect pests, and crop diversity helps spread economic risk that's a constant in farming. Rotational crops like field corn, cotton, and sorghum have a stabilizing effect on the agro-ecosystem by holding soil and nutrients in place, conserving soil moisture and water-holding capacity, and protecting against soil-borne diseases and depositing valuable natural minerals. These practices reduce the need for both chemical



inputs and costly manufactured fertilizers, and therefore benefit the consumer as well as the environment.

O'Neal noted, "We are in regular collaboration with researchers, including ongoing on-farm research with Clemson University, to discover improved growing methodologies and conservation. Our company culture embraces advancing technologies (we even invent them) and makes annual investments back into the company for continuous improvement and deployment of smart innovation for cost savings, efficiency, and improved crop quality." He added, "We try not to waste any produce and partner with food banks and other service organizations locally and nationally. To that end trucks pick up here at the farm and deliver to places of need. For example, through our partnership with Farm to Food Bank in 2015, Coosaw Farms shared fresh produce that was transformed into 986,208 meals for the hungry, and 374,298 pounds were donated directly from the fields in 2016."

On the county level, O'Neal is a member of the Farm Bureau Board of Directors and is on the Holy Trinity Classical Christian School Board of Governors. On the state level he is a member of the South Carolina Watermelon Association. On the national level, he's a member of the North American Blackberry and Raspberry Association, the National Watermelon Association and the Southeast Produce Council.

Christie O'Neal is the Business Director of Seaside Farm. She's a former member of the vestry at St. Helena's Anglican Church and is a current HTCCS (Holy Trinity Classical Christian School) Finance Committee member as well as a Women's Small Group Leader at St. Helena's Anglican Church.

On the subject of overcoming the challenges of farming as a career, O'Neal stated, "Over a decade ago, we began to see significant crop losses of watermelons to fusarium wilt. By adjusting the production system we have been able to restore our crop yields to previous levels. Aside from the inevitable market, labor, and weather ups and downs, you just have to realize at some point that some things are simply out of your control. All you can do is your best, do things correctly, and let go of the rest."

One of the most important and rewarding aspects of O'Neal's daily life is seeing Coosaw Farms employees develop their full potential in whatever job they're tackling. He observed, "Over time I can see remarkable growth in people—growth in capability, confidence, and good decision-making."

The O'Neals are also faithful members of St. Helena's Anglican Church and have helped build, support, and sponsor the Holy Trinity Classical Christian School in Beaufort as well as its sister school, the Good Shepherd Academy in Juba, South Sudan.

The O'Neal family takes an annual trip to Islamorada in the Florida Keys, to kick back, fish, and enjoy living like Jimmy Buffet for a week. Whenever they can take time for the two of them, Brad and Christie like to head to one of the Caribbean islands like Antigua, Tortola, or Turks & Caicos.



Summing up his personal philosophy, O'Neal said, "If you're not growing, you're dying. And there's nothing wrong with competition, but you should compete with yourself, not the other guy. I think prosperity is infinite if you're willing to work hard for it. But it's also necessary and a Christian duty to 'throw the rope back over the fence' and help someone else climb over. Lastly, you better have fun farming because you're not going to have much time to do anything else!"

Robert Last nominated Brad O'Neal for South Carolina Farmer of the Year. He is the Commercial Horticulture Agent, Cooperative Extension for Clemson University in Lexington County. Last said, "It is my pleasure to nominate Brad O'Neal for the coveted farmer of the year award. I have worked with Brad on research projects, and developing new enterprises for the farm. He's an outstanding example of someone who's open to innovative ideas, practices, and technology, and making the difficult but necessary adjustments when major farming trends change.

"As a member of Farm Bureau, Brad has been an excellent advocate for South Carolina agriculture on the state and national levels. He also has the ability to achieve expansion and maintain quality yields through careful management of both the farm and developing critical human resources. He is committed to giving back to others in the farming community and prioritizing time with his family. The entire team at Coosaw Farms is dedicated to providing first-rate produce grown with care and dedication."

A distinguished panel of judges will visit Brad O'Neal, 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.