

# Sunbelt Ag Expo

## Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release  
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For Immediate Release

### **STEVE COBB NAMED 2023 SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR**

[Moultrie, GA]—Steve Cobb, of Lake City, Arkansas, has been selected as the overall winner of the Sunbelt Ag Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award for 2023.

Cobb Farms is a partnership enterprise that began over fifty years ago in Craighead County. Today, on a total of 4,500 acres (2,500 rented and 2,000 owned), it grows row crops, produce, and show pigs. Three entities make up the partnership: 1) Steve Cobb and Family is a leading show-pig operation that produces 1,000+ show pigs a year as well as breeding stock for club pig production. 2) Cane Island Farms oversee the row crops of corn, cotton, and peanuts. 3) The Cane Island Produce branch grows vegetables, specializing in year-round greenhouse tomatoes.

In addition, Circle L Farms handles all of Cane Island Farm's trucking needs as well as Steve Cobb and Family's grain hauling. The company runs eight trucks daily and helps out local brokers as well.

Cobb recalled, "I was born on a subsistence farm where my parents owned 40 acres given to my mother by her father. Over time they rented another 200 acres. Our family farm looked like 'Old McDonald's Farm' that you see in children's books. We raised cotton, wheat, soybeans, and enough corn to feed the livestock, which consisted of two dairy cows that we milked daily and three brood sows. The barn yard and house yard were full of chickens that produced eggs, and we planted a big garden every year."

Cobb grew up and went to school with his future wife, Terri. They married in 1977, and she had a 32-year career as a second grade teacher, retiring about a decade ago. All these years later he is known on the farm as "Papa," and she is known on the farm as "Gran" and in the community as "Miss Terri." He added, "One of the biggest joys of my life is that she and I live on that same farm where

we raised our three children, Jarrett, Aaron, and Leslie. Our eight grandchildren are around every week, running and playing on the same land.”

The Cobb partnership operation is managed by Steve and Terri’s son, Aaron and his wife Cassandra, daughter, Leslie Lyerly and her husband Erick, and long-time employee, friend, and now partner, Darin Owens, and his wife Leigh Ann Owens and their daughter Taylor and her husband, Kyle Outlaw. Their daughters, Emily and Bailey and Bailey’s husband, Caleb Dunbar, also pitch in. Steve and Terri Cobb’s oldest son, Jarrett, practices criminal, personal injury, probate and agricultural law. His wife, Ashley, is a licensed clinical social worker and mental health therapist at True Hope Counseling in Jonesboro.

The partnership’s crop yields are as follows: 1,800 acres of irrigated corn yielding 210 bushels/acre; 2,599 acres of irrigated cotton yielding 1,300 lbs/acre; 101 acres of irrigated peanuts yielding 2.5 tons/acre; and greenhouse tomatoes yielding 70 lbs/plant x 200 plants. In addition, the show pig business produces 1000+ show pigs a year.

Steve Cobb and Family Farm has set a number of records in its show pig and boar sales and has successfully marketed winning show pigs across more than forty states through eight annual online auctions at [showpig.com](http://showpig.com). Cobb said, “We host several ‘preview’ days on our farm before each sale, where dozens of show pig customers view our show pig prospects. The pigs are also listed on [Stevecobbfamily.com](http://Stevecobbfamily.com). We occasionally offer elite breeding boar prospects for sale directly to boar stud businesses.”

Cane Island Farms’ cotton is ginned at Southland Gin in Lake City and is marketed through Olam Agri. They also grow non-GMO corn for Ozark Mountain Poultry of George’s Chicken. Peanuts are marketed through Birdsong Peanuts for cleaning, shelling, and sizing before they’re shipped to food manufacturers. The farm has plans to build a feed warehouse to improve efficiency and quality of feed making. Designs are in the works for an off-site show pig fitting facility as well.

Cane Island Produce, the newest endeavor in the partnership, sells through a local community network and on its Facebook page. The latter features pictures of a variety of mouth-watering sausage balls, baked beans with sausage, vegetable soup with sausage, half and whole hog packages, homemade jam, and green tomato chow-chow. Cane Island Produce has recently branched out from the initial greenhouse tomato operation into other vegetables such as purple hull peas, okra,

green beans, cucumbers, squash, bell peppers, and jalapeno peppers. The company has plans to add more greenhouses and expand into flower production.

On Cane Island Farms, Lyerly said they are constantly exploring new ideas and technology. “We are working with Valley Irrigation on automated irrigation risers and wells controlled by smartphone. We’re also considering the idea of building solar arrays on our farm and leveraging technology, such as targeted treatment with drones.” He added, “Each of our entities holds environmental conservation to the highest standards. We’re currently focused on irrigation practices and seed selection as well as timing and rate of input applications. Through our partnership with NRCS, we’re looking into implementation of regenerative agriculture production practices.”

Steve Cobb commented on the challenges his farm partnership has faced over the years. “The late 1990s basically changed the entire swine industry. Before that time, it was mostly family-owned operations, but that’s no longer the case. There was a market crash in 1998 that forced us to change our entire model from breeding stock production to focusing on show pig production. We also had to be flexible in marketing our product and finding a sustainable customer base. My son Aaron also stepped up big time to support this important and much-loved part of our farm business.”

As for Cane Island Farms Partnership, a huge disaster struck in October of 2014, when a terrible hailstorm hit just days before harvest. Owens recalled, “That storm took out 75 percent of our cotton crop. The same year our grain brokerage filed for bankruptcy, resulting in a total loss of our corn crop. It was a year full of pain as we lost one of our most beloved employees, Glen Eaton, in a tragic accident. We simply came to a full stop and started reevaluating how to go forward.”

That’s when the farms added peanuts to their rotation, a risky move that paid dividends and enabled the partnership to remain competitive. Owens said, “The peanuts also helped us increase yields on our cotton on the years following the peanut crop.”

On a more personal note, in 2010, one of Cobb’s granddaughters, Scout Lyerly, was just two years old when she was diagnosed with stage 4 Neuroblastoma, a cancer of the nervous system. Cobb remembered, “This illness taught each of us more valuable life lessons than we can ever list. We grew to cherish each other more every single day and thank the Lord for his goodness in bringing Scout through that ordeal. She’s now a very lively 14-year-old teenager. We continue to

support St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis for their wonderful care.”

Cobb is a long-time member of Farm Bureau and a supporter of the local Buffalo Island Central FFA Chapter. He has just completed his second and final term on the National Swine Registry Board of Directors and Executive Committee. He serves on the board of the American Yorkshire Club and also judges local, state, and national championship show hog events. He is a member of both the local and state FFA Alumni Association.

When schedules allow, Steve and Terri Cobb love going to the athletic events their eight grandchildren are involved in: baseball, basketball, barrel racing, and other rodeo activities. Their number one getaway spot is a lake house they own 90 miles away in the Ozark Mountains at Lake Thunderbird. Cobb commented, “It’s just an hour and a half away, so it’s easy to enjoy the area year round. We fish, swim, water-ski and go tubing and just have plain old fun together.”

As for lessons learned from farming, Cobb said, “In a practical sense, you have to be intense in your work ethic and progressive. Change has been so phenomenal and fast during my lifetime that it’s almost overwhelming. We’ve gone in a few short generations from small subsistence farms to large commercial enterprises. So it’s important to keep up the pace and stay open to innovative techniques, equipment, and ideas.”

He added, “On a more philosophical note, what I’ve learned from farming is how important it is to appreciate the cycle of growth, whether it’s crops, baby animals, children, or grandchildren. Everything is constantly renewing. Agriculture mimics life in that way, being a constant display of development to fruition. And lastly, I’ve learned how important the ag industry, with its production and delivery system, is to our survival as a species. The scale of farm operations has definitely changed but the roots are the same; they’re eternal. What we do is essential for all life as we know it. I’m grateful and blessed to be part of that.”

Justin R. Ladd, Senior Financial Office of Farm Credit Mid-America, nominated Steve Cobb to be the Arkansas Farmer of the Year. He said, “At any national livestock show or state fair livestock show in the United States, Steve Cobb and his family are recognized as industry leaders. His hogs are some of the most prize-winning hogs in the country. He’s also well-respected locally because he’s done so much for the surrounding community. They’ve spent countless hours giving back to the local FFAs and 4-H Clubs, and have raised money for St. Jude’s Children’s

Research Hospital in Memphis. It's truly an impressive extended family partnership with a track record of excellent farming, integrity, and generosity."

The new Farmer of the Year was selected for the honor by three judges. This year's judging tour of all ten state farmer winners took place during the week of August 14–18. The judges included 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. Judges typically serve for three years before rotating off the team.

Senior judge David Wildy said, "Excellence in Agriculture is how I would describe this year's State Farmers of the Year. They are a leading group of farmers and businessmen who represent their states with excellence."

He continued, "Just as I expected, this year's winner was an extremely difficult decision for the judging team. But, without question, this year's winner represents precisely what the Southeastern Farmer of the Year program is all about. He is a very humble individual who goes above and beyond to help others and his community. He and his family's operation checked all the boxes. Without a doubt, this farmer has what it takes to insure that this family operation will be successful and sustainable. He will represent the SE FOY program with much distinction, as will all ten state winners."

This is the thirty-third 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.

The Farmer of the Year program has new sponsors in 2023 as Massey Ferguson, Harper Family Holdings, the Alabama Farmers Federation, Arkansas Farm Bureau, Florida Farm Bureau, Georgia Farm Bureau, Kentucky Farm Bureau, Mississippi Farm Bureau, North Carolina Farm Bureau, South Carolina Farm Bureau, Tennessee Farm Bureau, and Virginia Farm Bureau have joined together to generously sponsor the program.

As the state winners of the Sunbelt Expo award, they received a \$2,500 cash award and an expense-paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo from the sponsors. A vest from the Sunbelt Ag Expo was given to each state winner and nominator. The Moultrie Colquitt Co. Chamber of Commerce gave each state winner a local keepsake.

Additionally, Massey Ferguson North America provided each state winner with a gift package.

Mr. Cobb, the Southeastern Farmer of the Year winner, received a \$15,000 cash prize from the sponsors. Massey Ferguson North America will provide Cobb Farms with the use of a Massey Ferguson tractor for a year or 250 hours (whichever comes first). He was also awarded a jacket from the Sunbelt Ag Expo, a Hays Smoker/Grill from Hays LTI, and a Henry Repeating Arms American Farmer Tribute Edition rifle from Reinke Irrigation. A total of \$1,284,000 in cash awards and other honors have been awarded to 286 southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous Arkansas winners include Michael Simon of Conway, 2007; Brian Kirksey of Amity, 2008; Orelan Johnson of England, 2009; Bill Haak of Gentry, 2010; Michael Oxner of Searcy, 2011; Heath Long of Tichnor, 2012; Phillip DeSalvo of Center Ridge, 2013; Nathan Reed of Marianna, 2015; David Wildy of Manila, 2016; Mark Morgan of Clarksville, 2017; Luke Alston of Mena, 2018, and Chris Isbell of Humnoke, 2019; Jamie Anderson of Lonoke, 2020; and Chris Sweat of McCaskill, 2022.