

Sunbelt Ag Expo

Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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For Immediate Release

[Moultrie, GA] Faylene Whitaker, of Climax, North Carolina, has been selected as the overall winner of the Sunbelt Ag Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year Award for 2024.

Two years after they married, Faylene Whitaker and her late husband, Richard, started their own farm in 1975 on ten acres of rented land, using a 150 International tractor and a \$40 tobacco setter. When the first crop was sold, they applied the proceeds to the purchase of 36.5 more acres. “That winter,” Faylene recalled, “my husband, who had a farming background, started a tree-planting business, and I was responsible for growing our plants and preparing the land for planting.”

Eventually the Whitaker’s bought a larger tractor and actually began working 24 hours a day—one taking the day shift and the other the night shift. They paid back their first hard-won bank loan in one year and overcame drought to begin irrigating their fields. In 1983, they were able to build their house on the original tract and began cultivating vegetables in addition to tobacco. Each year thereafter the couple added a few more acres and continued to diversify crops.

Today Whitaker Farms & Garden Nursery operates at three different locations in and around Climax, North Carolina, on 940 acres of owned and rented land that produces tobacco, garden plants (annuals, perennials, houseplants, trees, and shrubs), field tomatoes, strawberries, organic corn and wheat, and a variety of vegetables. It also features an agritourism business catering to all age groups.

Faylene said, “Our older son, Shane, joined us after he graduated from college; we then converted our row crops and tobacco crops to organic. He is a major partner in our farm business and serves on the local and state Soil and Water Conservation Service boards as well as the NC Tobacco Growers board and the NC Farm Bureau Flue-Cured Tobacco Advisory Committee.” Shane’s wife, Kelly, is a minor partner and a licensed environmental engineer who serves on the NC Farm Bureau’s Agritourism Advisory Committee and is the vice-president and past treasurer of

Providence Grove High School. Nephew Winston Coley is a minor partner with ten years' experience on the farm, and grandson Chase is also an employee in the family business with future prospects for partnership.

Whitaker Farms & Garden Nursery currently has a total of 69 employees: 28 are H2A workers, 15 are full time, and 26 are seasonal. Faylene noted, "You can never run a successful business without good, loyal, talented people around you. They are there to do their jobs, but they are also there to teach what we each need to know in order to make the business better. If you go through a day without learning anything, you're not listening to others." Another piece of wisdom Faylene has learned over her many years of farming is, "Work stays at work; we never take it home to the family."

When Travis, the Whitaker's younger son, graduated from college, he also worked on the farm but eventually started his own businesses: Whitaker Waterscapes and Deep River Apparel, which he owns with his wife, Shannon. Faylene added, "Our landscape and design business is expanding to meet the needs of the many new homes and businesses in our area. We are currently adding a camping option at one farm, and we plan to add more in the future."

Another component of Whitaker Farms is Whitaker Equipment, LLC, a company that works on large tractors and equipment and repairs all of its own trucks with one full-time mechanic, three part-time employees, and three licensed CDL drivers. Whitaker-owned trucks haul all of the farm's crops, produce, stone, and landscape equipment.

Crop yields on Whitaker Farms are as follows: at the two garden centers, 5 acres yielding approximately 170,000 plants; 200 acres of tobacco yielding 2420 lbs/acre; 32 acres of field tomatoes yielding 16 tons/acre; 9 acres of strawberries yielding approximately 18,000 lbs/acre; 230 acres of organic corn yielding 160 bushels/acre; 180 acres of organic wheat yielding 35 bushels/acre; 25 acres of vegetables for retail with varying yields; 5 acres of agritourism receiving 25,000 visitors a year.

Whitaker Farms markets directly to the public by inviting customers to shop at two garden centers and at their produce buildings that sell flowers, fruits, vegetables, bakery items, ice cream, and lunch foods. They also offer educational school tours and feature a picnic area and a playground. Faylene said, "We're passionate about reaching consumers and educating them about agriculture through television ads,

our website (www.whitakerfarm.com), social media, farm tours, and special events like our spring picking of strawberries and our fall pumpkin patch.”

Vegetables and tomatoes are shipped on their trucks to the state farmers market where stores from all over the region and Virginia pick up fresh produce. Strawberries and greenhouse tomatoes are all sold retail. Tobacco is sold under contract to three different companies. A local milling company and an organic chicken company buy the wheat and corn.

Faylene recalled, “When I started out, the biggest problem I had was that I was a 19-year-old woman with no farming background or experience. Everyone asked to speak with my dad or husband. But I studied hard, visited farms, took a number of farming classes, and learned accounting, earning the nickname ‘book farmer’ in my neighborhood.” She added, “All through the years I was blessed to have a husband who was completely supportive of my ideas and efforts. We knew and respected each other’s strengths.”

As with many in the agriculture industry, the Whitaker’s faced labor shortages but managed over the years to build a loyal, long-term, and even multi-generational workforce. Another current challenge is farmland preservation in an area attractive to developers. Faylene noted, “To keep our land in agricultural use, we are continuing to diversify our business to make it relevant to the community and sustainable for the future. A personal challenge in 2023 was the loss of my partner in life and in farming, my husband, Richard. Through faith and the love and support of my family, I am dedicated to carrying on our vision for Whitaker Farms.”

On the local level, since 2001 Faylene has served on the Randolph County Farm Bureau Women’s Committee and has past involvement with Randolph County FSA and Randolph County Soil and Water Committee. On the state level, Faylene currently serves on the NC Board of Agriculture, the NC Farm Bureau State Board, and the NC Farm Bureau State Women’s Leadership Committee. She’s also served as a past vice president of the NC Greenhouse Vegetable Growers Association, the NC Tobacco Growers Association Board, The NC Strawberry Association Board, and the USDA NC State FSA Board. On the national level, she and Richard worked with members of the US Congress and other tobacco farmers on the tobacco buyout. She and Richard traveled twice to Brazil on behalf of the tobacco industry and the NC Board of Agriculture for various crops.

On the local level, Richard Whitaker was a member of the Randolph County Tobacco Growers Association and served long-term as president of the Randolph County Farm Bureau. On the state level, he was a board member of the North Carolina Farm Bureau and served on its executive board as well as the board of the North Carolina Greenhouse Vegetable Growers Association.

As for environmental issues, Faylene said, “We take our role as stewards of the land very seriously and are always looking for effective, efficient ways to care for our property. We constructed a chemical building that meets soil and water conservation program specifications so that all chemicals are mixed and contained in one area.” The Farm operation plants cover crops on all land after crops are harvested. Water waste is minimized by using drip irrigation on all vegetable and fruit crops. Eighty-five percent of the land is now devoted to organic production, and 110 acres have been placed in a farmland preservation trust.

All the Whitaker family members are long-time attendees of nearby Red Cross Baptist Church—a place where, as boys, Shane and Travis used to drive their tractor through the woods to attend Vacation Bible School. When the Whitaker’s carve out some leisure time, they enjoy spending it at Shane and Kelly’s place on Badin Lake where they boat and fish and just relax. Each Thanksgiving they drive to Cape Hatteras for a family vacation. Faylene added, “Sunday afternoons we have a traditional cookout at the house and enjoy swimming in the pool when the weather’s good.”

After nearly fifty years of farming, Faylene has learned to surround herself with people she trusts who can step in when times are hard or illness strikes. Cross training key farm personnel is another important part of her management style. She said, “The most rewarding aspect of farming has been working alongside my husband each day and bringing our children up on the farm with a strong sense of responsibility. We let them make their own mistakes so they could learn and grow from them, as we all have. Employees also need to know they are valued.” She summed up her priorities: “God is first, family is second, employees and friends are third, and the business comes fourth because without the first three, the farm won’t matter.”

Faylene Whitaker was nominated North Carolina Farmer of the Year by Tadashi Totten, District Field Representative at North Carolina Farm Bureau. He said, “The Whitaker family farm began as a dream that came true through dedication and hard work over nearly five decades. When Richard passed away in August 2023, Faylene committed herself to keeping his legacy alive and expanding her own

vision for the farm. She now works alongside her older son and other family members to share her love of agriculture and to pass it along for future generations. She is a great voice and advocate for North Carolina and US agriculture and serves in many state and national agriculture organizations that promote its importance.”

The new Farmer of the Year was selected for the honor by three judges. This year’s judging tour of all eight state farmer winners took place during the week of August 5–8. The judges included Joe W. West, retired Assistant Dean UGA Tifton Campus; John McKissick, retired Ag Economist UGA; and Charles Ed Snipes, retired Weed Scientist Mississippi State University. Judges typically serve for three years before rotating off the team.

Senior judge Joe West said, “The 2024 Sunbelt Ag Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year was selected from an outstanding group of eight state Farmers of the Year. The recipient was chosen because of their outstanding qualifications. The winner is highly diversified and has demonstrated the ability to adapt their operation to changing economic conditions as well as commodity and consumer preferences.”

He continued, “The recipient is creative in looking toward the next innovation to improve the operation. Employee retention is excellent, and employees are treated with respect and receive competitive wages and benefits. The operation is data driven, and profit centers are monitored closely and frequently to make decisions to optimize profitability. The recipient keeps excellent records, addresses challenges head on, and has a solid succession plan in place to ensure that the operation is sustainable for future generations. The state winners are all outstanding, and this competition was extremely close and challenging for the judges. We congratulate the 2024 Sunbelt Ag Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year!”

The Southeastern Farmer of the Year award 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.

Harper Family Holdings, the Alabama Farmers Federation, Arkansas Farm Bureau, Florida Farm Bureau, Georgia Farm Bureau, North Carolina Farm Bureau, Tennessee Farm Bureau, and Virginia Farm Bureau have joined together to generously sponsor the 2024 program.

State winners of the Sunbelt Expo award will receive a \$2,500 cash award and an expense-paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo from the sponsors. A vest from the sponsors will be given to each state winner and nominator. The Moultrie Colquitt Co. Chamber of Commerce will give each state winner a local keepsake.

The state winners are now eligible for the \$15,000 cash prize awarded to the overall winner by the sponsors. 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 sponsors will be given to the overall winner. Hays LTI will award the overall winner with a HAYS Smoker/Grill. In addition, the overall winner will receive a Henry Repeating Arms American Farmer Tribute Edition rifle from Reinke Irrigation. In addition, the state winners and overall winner will receive a diesel additive prize package from Howes Products.

The Sunbelt Expo is coordinating the Southeastern Farmer of the Year awards for the 34th consecutive year. A total of \$1,324,000 in cash awards and other honors have been awarded to 304 southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from North Carolina include John Vollmer of Bunn, 1990; Kenneth Jones of Pink Hill, 1991; John Howard, Jr. of Deep Run, 1992; Carlyle Ferguson of Waynesville, 1993; Dick Tunnell of Swan Quarter, 1994; Allan Lee Baucom of Monroe, 1995; Scott Whitford of Grantsboro, 1996; William Covington, Sr. of Mebane, 1997; Phil McLain of Statesville, 1998; Earl Hendrix of Raeford, 1999; Reid Gray of Statesville, 2000; Rusty Cox of Monroe, 2001; Craven Register of Clinton, 2002; Frank Howey, Jr. of Monroe, 2003; Eddie Johnson of Elkin, 2004; Danny McConnell of Hendersonville, 2005; Thomas Porter, Jr. of Concord, 2006; Bill Cameron of Raeford, 2007; V. Mac Baldwin of Yanceyville, 2008; Fred Pittillo of Hendersonville, 2009; Bo Stone of Rowland, 2010; Thomas Porter, Jr. of Concord, 2011; Gary Blake of North Wilkesboro, 2012; Wilbur Earp of Winnabow, 2013; Frank Howey, Jr., of Monroe, 2014; Danny Kornegay of Princeton, 2015; Jerry Wyant of Vale, 2016; and Van Hemrick of Hamptonville, 2017; Howard Brown of Andrews, 2018, and Johnny Wishon of Sparta, 2019; James L. Lamb of Clinton, 2020; Kevin Matthews of East Bend, 2022; and Jerry Wyant of Vale, 2023.

