

Sunbelt Ag Expo

Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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For Immediate Release

KENT HAMILTON NAMED 2025 SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR

[Moultrie, GA]—Kent Hamilton is CEO of Southern Valley Fruit and Vegetable, Inc., based in Norman Park, Georgia. Kent said, “It was founded in 1987 and is a family-operated corporation that’s spent generations growing, packing, and shipping fresh produce with care, integrity, and heart.”

Now spanning over 8500 cultivated acres across Georgia, Tennessee, Florida, and the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico, Southern Valley grows green beans, cabbage, trellis cucumbers, a variety of peppers and squash, sweet corn, trellis pickles, and eggplant and owns 100 head of cows. Kent said, “I started farming 37 years ago with my uncle and my late brother, Kirk, in a row crop operation centered on cotton, peanuts, and tobacco. Over time, we’ve strategically changed our focus to vegetables and expanded to ensure year-round productivity and to grow crops in regions with favorable seasonal climates.”

Kent’s daughter, Courtney Hamilton Griffin, is the Director of Operational Support. She oversees and coordinates across all departments, contributes to marketing initiatives, and has input on important farming funding. His son, Austin, serves as the Director of Agriculture for the company, overseeing all farming operations across every location. His job is to maximize crop yields and ensure optimal performance at each site. He’s also the current president of the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, helping advocate for the future of farming in his state. Son Presley is the head of purchasing and maintenance, supervising all repair and maintenance activities at the main farm shop and packing shed in Georgia, as well as being responsible for preparing and dispatching equipment to the satellite farm locations. He also handles procuring essential inputs.

Kent gives his wife Pam credit for being the rock upon which the family stands, instilling in their children a strong work ethic, the importance of respect, and how to build positive relationships. She also plays an active role in preserving the farm's produce for family use by participating in the canning process at the local Colquitt County Canning Plant.

Southern Valley maintains direct relationships with customers across retail, wholesale, and food service channels. All sales and marketing operations are managed in-house, allowing full control over the brand and customer experience. Kent added, "We're a fully integrated business – from seed to shelf – beginning with growing in our greenhouses and harvesting from our fields to employing our own labor force, operating our own packing facilities, and using our own trucking companies to ensure timely and efficient distribution to final destinations."

Their rich varieties of vegetables are grown on plastic beds with drip tape irrigation that helps conserve water and boost yields. Cucumbers are pole-grown for better plant health and productivity. Kent noted, "By planting more cover crops and rotating fields, we protect the soil and allow nutrients to rebuild naturally. And we are increasingly using biological products to promote healthier soil and reduce reliance on harsh chemical pesticides. This method protects beneficial insects and wildlife and helps to create and maintain a balanced ecosystem." He added, "We've prioritized data-driven decision making into our management process by leveraging tools like PowerBI, which has reduced stress, improved operational efficiency, and boosted profitability."

About ten years ago, Southern Valley partnered with Pratt Industries, the world's largest, privately held 100 percent recycled paper and packing company. The farm buys thousands of tons of recycled paper per year, saving over 100,000 trees annually and preventing thousands of cubic yards of landfill growth.

The Georgia location's approximately 250,000 sq. ft. packing house is equipped with a rapid post-harvest cooling system. Food safety protocols and industry best practices are meticulously carried out at every farm. Southern Valley is PrimusGFS certified, with third-party audits conducted regularly, and SMETA certified, reflecting management's commitment to sustainability and ethical labor practices.

Southern Valley has navigated its share of obstacles over the last four decades, from labor shortages to crop diseases to H2A program challenges. The farm currently hires 750 H2A seasonal workers in Georgia, 200 in Tennessee, 150 in

Florida, and 800 in Mexico. Kent said, “Strong leadership has been essential in overcoming these challenges. What began with my mother and aunt as first-generation leaders has transitioned to the second generation of my cousins and me, who continue to guide the business forward. Alongside us are our children who constitute the present and the future.”

The Hamiltons are active members of Heritage Church in Moultrie. With grandkids in tow, they enjoy leisure time at their place on the St. Marks River below Tallahassee, where they go swimming, fishing, and scalloping. As Kent said, “I like to take off when the fish are biting and just relax on the water. It’s worth the trip to taste the freshly sautéed scallops that we oven-bake with butter and cheese.”

He added reflectively, “I don’t see myself ever fully retiring, but I would like to eventually slow down a little. Farming has taught me that there are more things out of my control than are in my control. And no matter how bad things can get, there are always better times ahead. God sees to that balance. And those good times are to be enjoyed with family and loved ones. Solomon wrote about the brevity of life and, as I observe its cycles through farming, I have to concur. I know that simply getting up every morning and going to work is a privilege and a blessing.”

Kent Hamilton was nominated Georgia Farmer of the Year by Jeremy Kichler, County Extension Coordinator, Colquitt County. He said, “Kent and his family are a staple in the vegetable industry and in the local community. This third-generation farm started as an 80-acre operation 37 years ago and has grown exponentially, both domestically in Georgia, Tennessee, Florida, and in Mexico. Kent, his family members, his entire staff, and their workers are truly the “Best of the Best and richly deserve this honor.”

The new Farmer of the Year was selected for the honor by three judges. This year’s judging tour of all seven state farmer winners took place during the week of August 4–7. The judges included John McKissick, retired Ag Economist UGA; Charles Ed Snipes, retired Weed Scientist Mississippi State University; and Kevin Morgan, retired Executive Assistant to the President Florida Farm Bureau. Judges typically serve for three years before rotating off the team.

Senior judge John McKissick said, “Kent Hamilton and his family have developed a vegetable farming operation capable of supplying retail, wholesale, and food service customers with demanded products year round. By directly controlling all aspects of production, packaging, marketing, and transport of their products, they

have been able to remain flexible and quickly responsive to the changing regulatory, labor, and production environment on their farms in three different states and in Mexico. With a constant eye to profitability, the family has specialized in different business aspects by employing cutting-edge information systems and by concentrating on communication across the totality of Southern Valley Farms. Kent Hamilton and his family represent all the reasons why the family farm will remain the backbone industry of the Southeast.”

Returning program sponsors in 2025 are Harper Family Holdings, the Alabama Farmers Federation, Arkansas Farm Bureau, Florida Farm Bureau, Georgia Farm Bureau, North Carolina Farm Bureau, South Carolina Farm Bureau, and Virginia Farm Bureau. New sponsors for 2025 include the Georgia Association of Conservation Districts, the Alabama Association of Conservation Districts, Ag Georgia Farm Credit, Ag South Farm Credit, and SW Georgia Farm Credit.

As the state winner of the Sunbelt Expo award, they 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 and a diesel prize package from Howes.

