

Sunbelt Ag Expo

Southeastern Farmer of the Year

News Release
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For Immediate Release

WOODY LARSON NAMED 2026 FLORIDA FARMER OF THE YEAR

Growing up in a dairy farming family, Woody Larson always knew he wanted to farm. As a young child he'd sweep the feed room floor, bagging the sweepings to feed the dry cows for 15 cents a day. While his family roots run deep in agriculture, he knew he would have to make his own path to continue his family's legacy. Through buying, selling, and saving on the side, all while working full-time at the dairy, he slowly but steadily developed his farming portfolio. Fifty years later, he is an owner and serves as President of Larson Dairy Inc. (LDI) and several cattle ranches.

Once Woody graduated from the University of Florida in 1973, he went to work for the dairy full time. At that point, LDI had three dairy farms milking about 800 cows each. After starting as Farm Manager, he was promoted to General Manager five years later. When a farmer was getting out of the dairy business and an opportunity came available, LDI purchased a few additional dairies. At one point, LDI managed over 12,000 milking cows, 8 milking units, and 20,000 animals in total.

Woody and his brother, John, were both interested in the family business. Once their father exited the business, John received a few of the dairy units and Woody kept the others, continuing on the family name of LDI. Today, LDI is family-owned and operated by Woody and his two sons, Travis and Jacob. The business consists of two milking units totaling 6,400 cows, a calf barn raising 1,200 calves, and dry cow and heifer pasture consisting of 4,200 animals. LDI is located on 3,500 acres and provides over 100 jobs to the community.

Throughout the decades, Woody has implemented practices and feed programs that have steadily increased milk production. Today, production per cow has passed 30,000 lbs/cow per year, a record for South Florida and substantially up from 22,000lbs/cow just 20 years ago.

Through the decades, Woody has worked to advance the operation and stay ahead of times with sustainability and environmental stewardship. He's always prioritized Best Management Practices (BMP). In 2010, Woody was one of three dairy farmers that worked with the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to develop the Dairy BMP Manual.

Restrictions and regulations around dairy farming remain tight and highly regulated, and one area that has strong requirements is manure management. One goal for LDI is to reduce or eliminate surface water runoff from the farm. This has been achieved by building and housing cows in freestall barns for all of the milking herd. When the cows are in the barn, wastewater is captured and recycled. The manure then goes through a methane digester where the methane gas is collected and sold as renewable natural gas. The manure solids are spread back on to cropland.

Through this process, both byproducts get recycled as a vital resource. LDI is the first dairy in South Florida to install a methane digester.

Woody is part owner of Dairy Feeds Inc. The feed mill produces over 120,000 tons annually. Feed is the largest expense on a dairy, and this allows him to shop the markets, take delivery, and transfer the ingredients to the farm. Woody has served as President for the feed mill for the past 20 years, helping to make decisions that guide the business into the future.

The forage department on the farm grows and harvests their own hay production. LDI uses contract harvesters to chop and haul the haylage as well as the contracted corn silage grown offsite.

While operating the dairy business full time, Woody began to establish his beef herd on the side from scratch. It is now just as important as the dairy. He owns over 4,000 head of beef cows across thousands of acres on multiple ranches in Florida known as Dixie Ranch, 441 Cattle, and Old River Cattle.

In college, Woody bought 5 acres to live on and have a couple cows. As the opportunity arose, he would sell a piece of property or a cow, then invest the money to purchase more. He officially started the beef business by converting a dairy heifer raising facility. The beef operation started with several different breeds of cows.

“It was the typical mixed breed herd,” said Woody. “By careful selection of herd sires and raising high-quality replacements, we have achieved a top tier herd and consistently produce high-quality calves. Dixie Ranch cattle have a strong reputation for health and efficiency, along with being at or near the top in carcass quality grade for the last several years.”

The ranching enterprise is a cow/calf operation producing feeder calves. Calves are born in the fall or spring. Herds are managed by calving groups and marketed in truckload lots. The ranch markets their animals through a variety of different organizations. The healthy, easy to handle cattle coming off the ranch are in high demand and known to bring top prices in the market. Woody and his wife, Grace, made a decision in 2016 to reduce their concentration in the dairy and focus on the beef cattle enterprise.

Woody is thankful to have his sons working in the family operation. Their main responsibility is managing LDI. As a whole, part of their family tree goal is to plan accordingly so the next generation can succeed. He expects the dairy farms and ranches to continue well into the future.

Woody and Grace have three children, their sons Travis and Jacob, and their daughter Ginger. They grew up learning the value of hard work on the farm. Woody and Grace are also blessed to have their eight grandchildren growing up around the farm as well. Ginger and her family live in Ocala but enjoy visits to Okeechobee where the whole family can be together around the farm. Woody and Grace understand the importance of ensuring the farming legacy continues through generations to come and are committed to properly planning their succession so the children and grandchildren can continue the operation.

Woody has an extensive background of community, state, and national involvement in agricultural related organizations. As an inductee into the Florida Agriculture Hall of Fame, Woody has spent his career serving the agriculture community at large through Florida Cattlemen's Association, National Cattlemen's Beef Board, Beef Checkoff, and many more programs. He's participated in a plethora of activities as an active member of Florida Farm Bureau. Woody and Grace are active members in Okeechobee First Baptist Church and he's served his community in various capacities as a volunteer, speaker, and mentor to the next generation of agriculturalists.

Woody was nominated for the Farmer of the Year Award by Kyndall Bauer, District 7 Field Representative for Florida Farm Bureau.

“Mr. Larson is an exceptional leader whose character and grit stand out just as much as his agricultural success,” said Kyndall. “He is thoughtful, intuitive, and always looking for opportunities to help others succeed. That quality alone speaks volumes about the kind of person and leader he is. He understands that true leadership is not measured solely by personal accomplishments, but by the positive impact made on employees, fellow farmers, ranchers, and the community around him.”

A distinguished panel of judges will visit each finalist in August and the winner will be announced during the 2026 Sunbelt Ag Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year Luncheon.

Returning program sponsors in 2026 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, Virginia Farm Bureau, the Georgia Association of Conservation Districts, Ag Georgia Farm Credit, Ag South Farm Credit, and SW Georgia Farm Credit and Arkansas Farm Credit. New sponsors for 2026 include Phoebe Putney Health Systems.

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.