

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

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For Immediate Release

JOHN HUNDLEY NAMED 2010 FLORIDA FARMER OF THE YEAR

When it comes to sweet corn and fresh vegetables, John Hundley who lives in North Palm Beach, Fla., is an expert. He's a veteran of the fresh produce business, a sugarcane grower as well, who operates farms in both South Florida and South Georgia.

As a result of his success as a vegetable and sugarcane farmer, Hundley has been selected as the 2010 Florida winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Hundley now joins nine other state winners from the Southeast as finalists for the award. The overall winner will be announced on Tuesday, Oct. 19 at the Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

A farmer for 44 years, Hundley operates 15,859 acres, including 8,338 acres of rented land and 7,521 acre of owned land. Major crops last year included 8,154 acres of sweet corn, 3,973 acres of sugar cane, 738 acres of green beans, 1,440 acres of radishes, 156 acres of celery, 110 acres of squash, 762 acres of peanuts and 504 acres of cotton. Occasionally, he plants rice when he wants to flood land. He also raises 70 acres of turf grass sod and runs a beef cow-calf operation with 180 cows.

He works with seed companies to develop new sweet corn varieties. He grows Floratam sod, a type of St. Augustine grass that can be harvested year round. He says the market for turf lags the housing market by about six months. "The turf business is actually picking up now," he adds.

In South Florida, he farms organic muck soils near Lake Okeechobee in the Everglades Agricultural Area. These soils are vulnerable to loss through a process called subsidence caused by drainage and cultivation. Farming in this region is closely regulated to protect the Everglades. Farmers there pay a \$25 per acre tax for the privilege of farming to fund restoration projects in the Everglades. "We comply with South Florida Water Management District best management practices," he says. He adopted some of these practices, aimed at reducing phosphates in the water, before they became mandatory.

He uses global positioning systems to plant vegetables and sugarcane to insure that fertilizers and other inputs are not overused. He says his production practices have lowered his costs while producing higher yields, cleaner water and healthier soils. "Through laser leveling, crop rotation, precision fertilizer application and advanced water table management, we have decreased the phosphorus leaving our farm and slowed the

rate of soil subsidence,” he says. “We’re ensuring our farm will be sustainable for future generations.”

He has overcome labor shortages by adopting mechanical harvesting for his sugarcane. Insect pests and diseases are a constant threat in vegetables and Hundley has worked with professional scouts to develop pest management strategies. He’s especially proud of a pest control practice aimed at reducing rodent damage in sugarcane. He installed nesting shelters for owls that prey on rodents. He says this protects the bird population by eliminating the need for toxic rodent controls.

Harvest timing to meet market windows is critical to success in the produce business. For Hundley, there’s not much overlap in his Georgia and Florida operations. For instance, the off-season in Georgia coincides with the harvesting and shipping season in Florida.

He started farming in Georgia near the town of Bainbridge during 1990 where he grows sweet corn, green beans, peanuts and cotton. Occasionally, he plants field corn and soybeans in Georgia, depending on market prices.

His Florida cattle ranch is located near the town of Kenansville, in western Brevard County. His ranch land used to support citrus trees until a hurricane destroyed the grove.

“I cannot remember a time I wasn’t involved in farming,” Hundley recalls. “As a child, I spent time with my father on his farm. I drove tractors in my teens. I graduated from the University of Florida in 1965 and then worked for my dad on his farm.” His dad retired in 1969, before Hundley could farm in partnership with him. So that year, Hundley and his wife formed Hundley Farms, Inc., and farmed 400 acres with their first crops of sweet corn and radishes. “I started with \$25,000 in equipment and a \$25,000 loan co-signed by my father,” he recalls. “When we started, our operation was small for South Florida, but from there, Hundley Farms has grown into the business it is today. I’m fortunate and will be forever grateful to my parents for giving me the tools to build this company that has been such a blessing to my family.”

He isn’t solely responsible for his farming success. He credits his many farming partners including individuals Tom Holt, Sr., Billy McKinstry, Buddy McKinstry, and firms such as R.C. Hatton, Inc., and Florida Crystals. He depends on long-term employees. Mike Watkins is his sugarcane production manager. Tom Perryman manages sweet corn production. Andy Ballard manages green beans and turf grass. Artie Garza is his shop and equipment manager. And Tara Bunting is his office manager.

In Georgia, Hundley is a member of Decatur Gin Co., and American Peanut Growers Group, a farmer-owned shelling plant. He also invested in First United Ethanol based in Camilla, Ga. He’s is a member of the Sugar Cane Growers Cooperative of Florida and sits on their board and executive committee. He’s also on the board and serves as president of Pioneer Growers Cooperative.

He is a member of Western Palm Beach County Farm Bureau, Florida Farm Bureau, Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association, Georgia Sweet Corn Growers Exchange and Florida Sweet Corn Exchange. He served on the board of South Florida Water Management District and was a director of the South Florida Production Credit Association.

Patricia "Patsy" Hundley is his wife of 46 years. She serves as secretary-treasurer of his farming company. Patsy has been a member of First Baptist Church of Pahokee. She has also been a supporter of the Children's Home Society of Florida.

"We're a family farm, and I'm big on family participation," says Hundley. He and Patsy have two grown children. Their son John is production manager at the South Florida farm. Their daughter Krista works in accounting for the farm. Krista's husband Eric Hopkins is business manager for the farm.

"I have always wanted to farm and reach a level of success that would provide a comfortable life for my wife and children," Hundley says. "I have been successful, provided for my family and I'm thankful my children are involved in our farm. As a farmer, husband, father and grandfather, I'm truly blessed."

Danny Raulerson, director of field services with Florida Farm Bureau, coordinates the Farmer of the Year award in Florida. Hundley was nominated for the honor by Eva Webb from Loxahatchee, Fla., who works as an assistant director of field services for Florida Farm Bureau.

As the Florida winner, Hundley will now receive a \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo in Moultrie, Ga., from Swisher International of Jacksonville, Fla., a jacket and a \$200 gift certificate from the Williamson-Dickie Company, and a \$500 gift certificate from Southern States.

He is now eligible for the \$15,000 that goes to the overall winner. Other prizes for the overall winner include the use of a Massey Ferguson tractor for a year from Massey Ferguson North America, a custom made Canvasback gun safe from Misty Morn Safe Co., and another \$500 gift certificate from the Southern States cooperative. Also, Williamson-Dickie will provide another jacket, a \$500 gift certificate and \$500 in cash to the overall winner.

Swisher International, through its Swisher Sweets cigar brand and the Sunbelt Expo are sponsoring the Southeastern Farmer of the Year Award for the 21st consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$804,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from Florida include: Ernie Nunez of Dade City, 1990; Ernie Nunez of Dade City, 1991; Wayne Wiggins of Plant City, 1992; Leroy Baldwin of Ocala, 1993; Billy Long of Apopka, 1994; Richard Barber of Ocala, 1995; Al Bellotto of Lakeland, 1996; Rex Clonts of Apopka, 1997; John Hoblick of DeLeon Springs, 1998;

Doug Holmberg of Valrico, 1999; Damon Deas of Jennings, 2000, Gene Batson of Mount Dora, 2001; William Putnam of Alturas, 2002; Sonny Williamson of Okeechobee, 2003; Dale Sauls of Anthony, 2004; Louis “Red” Larson of Okeechobee, 2005; Damon Deas of Jennings, 2006; Alto “Bud” Adams of Ft. Pierce, 2007; Randy Strode of Longwood, 2008; and Cary Lightsey of Lake Wales, 2009.

Florida has had six overall winners: Ernie Nunez of Dade City, 1991; Leroy Baldwin of Ocala, 1993; Rex Clonts of Apopka, 1997; Doug Holmberg of Valrico, 1999; and Louis “Red” Larson of Okeechobee, 2005; and Cary Lightsey of Lake Wales, 2009.

Hundley’s farm, along with the farms of the other nine state finalists, will be visited by a distinguished panel of judges during the week of Aug. 9-13. The judges for this year include James Lee Adams, a farmer from Camilla, Ga., and the overall winner of the award in 2000; Jim Bone, field development manager for DuPont Crop Protection from Valdosta, Ga.; and Charles Snipes, a retired Mississippi Extension weed scientist who is president and research scientist with Stoneville R&D, Inc., from Greenville, Miss.

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Note to media: John Hundley’s farm will be visited by the judges on Friday, Aug. 13 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. Hundley Farms is located at 25849 County Rd. 880, Belle Glade, FL 33430. If you would like to visit the operation during the judging, please call Janie Batson at 704-788-7026, or contact her by e-mail at jbbatson@ctc.net, or contact Hundley Farms by calling 561-996-6855.