

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release

Contact: Janie Batson

704-788-7026

e-mail: jbbatson@ctc.net

For Immediate Release

ROBERT DASHER NAMED 2010 GEORGIA FARMER OF THE YEAR

A pioneer in the Vidalia onion industry, Robert Dasher of Glennville, Ga., has been instrumental in making the sweet onions a sought-after food item in grocery stores throughout the U.S.

As a result of his success as a Vidalia onion grower, Dasher has been selected as the 2010 Georgia winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Dasher 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.

Dasher's G&R Farms is a family partnership. He started farming full time 42 years ago with 130 acres. Now, his farm encompasses 4,800 acres with 800 acres of rented land and 4,000 acres of owned land.

His crops include 700 acres of onions yielding 30,000 pounds per acre, 1,200 acres of corn yielding 165 bushels per acre, 950 to 1,000 acres of soybeans yielding 55 bushels per acre, up to 400 acres of peanuts during some years yielding two tons per acre, 400 acres of hay yielding five tons per acre, 250 acres of wheat and rye which typically yield 40 bushels per acre and 150 acres of pecans yielding 800 pounds per acre. In addition, his cow-calf beef herd operation has about 1,500 cows.

As a hobby, he raises a one-acre patch of tomatoes each year. He enjoys giving away buckets of tomatoes to friends and people he meets.

He has made a concentrated effort to irrigate his land and convert his center pivots from diesel to electric power.

"Many people think there's a secret to growing sweet onions," he says. "The reason they're sweet is due to the texture and the elements in our soil. It must be the soil because we grow the same varieties that are planted elsewhere in the U.S."

His dad grew onions in the 1940's and 1950's. In the mid 1960's, the Piggly Wiggly grocery chain, with a distribution center in Vidalia, Ga., started selling the local onions. During the early 1980's, Dasher and his brother Gerald started selling onions to out-of-state customers through a farm-based mail order business. In the late 1980's, Kroger

started buying and promoting the onions in its grocery stores. “It was like lighting a match and starting a fire,” Dasher recalls. “We underwent a major expansion at that time, and now Vidalia onions are available in every state.”

He uses controlled atmosphere storage, a method developed by the University of Georgia, to extend his shipping season. He can store 220,000 bushels of onions, and this year, he installed a new onion dryer. “Wet onion stems can lead to botrytis, a bacterial disease, and this dryer will really pay off during wet years,” he adds.

Dasher and other family members handle the marketing of their onions. “We keep in touch with customers, and we don’t normally hire outside brokers,” he says. G&R was one of the first farms to ship onions in cardboard cartons. “This cuts down on bruising,” Dasher adds.

Though he’s growing no peanuts this year, he added cotton as a major crop on land he bought in Bulloch County, Ga. He plants rye with crimson clover for his cattle to graze. He also grazes cattle on family land growing pine trees. He rotates onions with other crops, and says onions produce better on sandy, loamy soils while cotton, soybeans and peanuts perform best on heavier land.

He can store about 75,000 bushels of grain on his farm, and has had good results selling corn to Claxton Poultry. “They sometimes pay 50 cents per bushel higher than the going prices,” he says. “Overall, the poultry industry has been good for Georgia. I also use poultry litter to fertilize my pastures.”

Dasher grew tobacco grower for more than 40 years. He grew his first acre of tobacco at age 10. “Tobacco was a good crop,” he recalls. “We grew it a few years after the quota buyout, but then our input costs tripled, with jumps in fertilizer and gas prices. Also, spotted wilt virus hit our tobacco, and it was no longer profitable. This is our third year not to grow tobacco.”

As he looks to the future, he’s considering expanding in cotton. He’s also exploring new crops. He believes sweet corn could be a good fit because he could use the same labor force and packing facilities he uses for onions. “All we’d need would be ice-making machines and a hydrocooler,” he adds.

He has also invested in some related businesses. Dasher Industries harvests timber and manages timberland owned by family members and others. Another of his business ventures was responsible for mowing 6,000 acres of grass over a 15-year period at the nearby Fort Stewart Army base.

Labor issues have been an ongoing concern for Dasher. He currently relies on H-2A foreign guest workers to plant, harvest and grade his onions. He’d like to see the H-2A program become more user-friendly for both employers and employees.

Conservation is a priority. In 1982, Dasher was named Soil Conservationist of the Year for Tattnall County, Ga. He has enrolled some of his land in the Wildlife Incentive Program. “Nobody has to tell me to put in a grassed waterway or a terrace,” he says. “Our topsoil is precious, and if you don’t protect it, that would be like a carpenter leaving all of his tools out in the rain.”

He was named Vidalia Onion Grower of the Year in 2004. Dasher is a member of the Canoochee EMC board. He has been a member of the Vidalia Onion Committee board and chaired the Vidalia Onion Business Council. He has been active in the Young Farmers Association and Farm Bureau of Tattnall County. He serves on an agricultural advisory board for Sen. Johnny Isakson. He has also served on the board of the National Onion Association and was active in the Produce Marketing Association.

G&R Farms is a strong supporter of community organizations, including Relay for Life and Tattnall Productions featuring local talent and musical performances each January. Dasher has donated historical farm equipment to the Vidalia Onion Museum and he supports Glennville’s Sweet Onion Festival. G&R has also donated the use of a large smoker for barbecue fundraising projects held by more than 15 clubs and schools.

Dasher and his wife Debbie are members of First Baptist Church of Glennville. They have two sons, Heath and Blake. Heath manages row crops on the farm and Blake oversees the timber division. Debbie also helps in onion grading and packing. Dasher’s brother, Gerald, died in 2003, but Gerald’s widow and son still work at G&R Farms.

Steve Brown, assistant dean for Extension with the University of Georgia, is the state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award. Cliff Riner, Extension agent in Tattnall County, nominated Dasher for the honor.

As the Georgia state winner, Dasher will now receive a \$2,500 cash award and an expense paid trip to the Sunbelt Expo 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 also now eligible for the \$15,000 that will go 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. During the past 20 years, 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 Georgia include: Timothy McMillian of Enigma, 1990; Bud Butcher of Senoia, 1991; James Lee Adams of Camilla, 1992; John Morgan of Mystic, 1993; Alan Verner of Rutlege, 1994; Donnie Smith of Willacoochee, 1995; Armond Morris of Ocilla, 1996; Thomas Coleman, Jr. of Hartsfield, 1997; Glenn Heard of Bainbridge, 1998; Bob McLendon of Leary, 1999; James Lee Adams of Camilla, 2000; Daniel Johnson of Alma, 2001; Armond Morris of Ocilla, 2002; Jim Donaldson of Metter, 2003; Joe Boddiford of Sylvania, 2004; Jimmy Webb of Leary, 2005; Gary Paulk of Wray, 2006; Daniel Johnson of Alma, 2007; Wayne McKinnon of Douglas, 2008; and Bill Brim of Tifton, 2009.

Georgia has had two overall winners with James Lee Adams of Camilla in 2000 and Armond Morris of Ocilla in 2002.

Dasher'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, manager of field development 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.

###

Note to media: G&R Farms owned by Robert Dasher will be visited by the judges on Friday, Aug. 13 from 1:15 p.m. until 4:15 p.m. The farm is located just off Hwy. 144 East of Glennville at 102 Dasher Rd., Glennville, GA 30247. If you would like to visit the farm during the judging, please call Janie Batson at 704-788-7026, or contact her by e-mail at jbbatson@ctc.net, or contact Dasher by calling 912-654-2100.