

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

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For Immediate Release

DAN BATSON NAMED 2010 MISSISSIPPI FARMER OF THE YEAR

Dan Batson of Perkinston, Miss., comes from a family steeped in horticulture and his GreenForest Nursery has become a model for the industry.

As a result of his success in the nursery business, Batson has been selected as the 2010 Mississippi winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Batson 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.

Batson started 27 years ago with 1-1/2 acres in horticultural production on 80 acres of owned land. He expanded and now has 140 acres in production. He owns 600 acres and grows pines on land not in nursery production. "Our major crops are ornamental trees," he says. These include southern magnolia, holly, oaks, crape myrtle and others."

He measures annual production by the number of trees sold and the size of their containers. These include 210,000 small plants called liners sold in quart-size containers, 14,500 small trees in pots ranging from one to seven gallons, and 187,500 larger trees in containers of 15 to 65 gallons.

"My grandfather had a nursery," he says. "My dad was a horticulturist who managed greenhouses at Callaway Gardens, and later grew Easter lilies. One of my uncles was a horticulture professor at Mississippi State. So horticulture has been in my blood."

He graduated with two ornamental horticulture degrees from Mississippi State and worked for a year at a nursery in Louisiana. The call of land that had been in his family since the mid 1800's brought him back to Mississippi where he started collecting yaupon and wax myrtle trees from the woods during the early 1980's. He placed them in 15-gallon pots, grew them for a few months and then sold them to generate cash flow.

During this time, he discovered the Kathy Ann yaupon holly variety in the woods and named it after his wife. This holly has since become a widely used landscape plant in the South. Little Gem magnolia has been his other best seller. He hopes a new upright yaupon called Scarlet's Peak will be his next winner. He says it's ideal for small building lots.

His entry into the nursery business was well timed. It coincided with a booming housing market and when large plastic container pots for trees were being introduced. He was an early adopter.

The economy has affected his business because it is closely tied to the housing market,," says Batson. "We've kept our declines to single digits. We're maintaining our production and I don't believe we will have to cut back drastically."

He sells strictly wholesale and has no retail customers. "Most of our customers are landscapers or re-wholesalers in the Southeast," he says. He markets trees at state and regional nursery trade shows. He and his sales staff make personal contacts with potential customers. He ships trees on a regular basis to customers in Atlanta, Dallas, Memphis and points in between.

Water conservation is a major emphasis at GreenForest Nursery. "We have land that we strictly use for water supply," says Batson. "Rather than drill deep wells, we use that land to capture surface water from a stream." He worked closely with the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service to slope his planting beds and to install water-holding areas to retain and recycle irrigation water. "NRCS is also helping us convert beds with overhead irrigation to drip systems," he adds. "This will help cut our water use to 25% of what we used with overhead irrigation."

He continues to work on solving a major tree nursery problem: pots blown over by strong winds. His nursery is vulnerable because it is close to the hurricane-prone Gulf Coast. He has used the pot-in-pot system to prevent blow-over, by placing smaller pots containing the trees into larger pots buried in the ground. He has also used aboveground wire baskets to stabilize the pots along with posts and wires on some of his plants. "We use another system that is crude, but effective," he explains. "We take rebar steel and drive it through the container and into the ground."

Among his innovative practices, he uses silage wagons to fill pots with pine bark, his main growing medium. He also uses direct planting of small plants into 15- or 30-gallon pots. Most nurseries, he says, start young plants in one-gallon pots and then transplant them several times into larger containers. He also worked with a Florida trailer manufacturer to develop low-deck trailers as a worker safety innovation to make it easy for employees to lift and move the large containers and trees. In addition, he's now using slow-release fertilizer to minimize nutrient leaching losses.

Batson also hopes to work with researchers in developing biodegradable pots for trees made from chicken feathers and other organic materials.

He has been active in his church as a Sunday school teacher, serving on a pastor parish relations committee and chairing the church's building grounds committee. He has served on the boards of his local soil and water conservation district, the Stone County School District and the Bank of Wiggins. He has given back to his community by designing and landscaping a park in Wiggins, Miss. He also donated trees to a highway beautification

project in Wiggins. For replanting after Hurricane Katrina, he donated trees for Bay St. Louis, Miss., and for a school in Long Beach, Miss.

He has been a board member and president of the Mississippi Nursery and Landscape Association. He also received this group's Nursery Person Service Award. He received the Southern Nursery Association's David E. Laird Award that recognizes young nursery producers for their service. He also served on the board and as president of the Southern Nursery Association. He has also been active in the Wholesale Nursery Growers of America and the Horticulture Research Institute.

Besides serving as inspiration for his best-selling yaupon holly, Batson's wife Kathy Ann works in accounting and handles receivable and payable accounts for the nursery business. She takes part in major investments and decisions regarding the business. Kathy Ann has also served on the board of trustees for the United Methodist Church the Batson's attend, and she has worked at the Stone County Food Pantry.

They have one son, Brad, a student at the University of Mississippi majoring in marketing and public relations. Brad worked at the nursery while in high school and was responsible for maintaining the nursery's Web site: www.greenforestnursery.com.

Joe Street, associate director of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, is the state coordinator for the Farmer of the Year award. Tricia Knight, department head and professor of ornamental horticulture at Mississippi State University's Coastal Research and Extension Center in Biloxi, nominated Batson for the honor. Knight admires Batson's innovative work, especially in water use and reclamation. She says, "People who know quality know they will get it from Dan's plants."

As Mississippi winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Batson 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. 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 Mississippi include: Hugh Arant, Sr. of Ruleville, 1990; Bill Hawks of Hernando, 1991; Kenneth Hood of Gunnison, 1992; Tol Thomas of Cruger,

1993; Rick Parsons of Vance, 1994; Ed Hester of Benoit, 1995; Bill Harris of Benton, 1996; Robert Miller of Greenwood, 1997; Ted Kendall, III of Bolton, 1998; Wayne Bush of Schlater, 1999; William Tackett of Schlater, 2000; Willard Jack of Belzoni, 2001; Hugh Arant, Jr. of Ruleville, 2002; Rick Parsons of Vance, 2003; Sledge Taylor of Como, 2004; Laurance Carter of Rollins Fork, 2005; Brooks Aycock of Belzoni, 2006; Tom Robertson of Indianola, 2007; Gibb Steele III of Hollandale, 2008; and Donald Gant of Merigold, 2009.

Mississippi has had three overall winners with Kenneth Hood of Gunnison in 1993, Ed Hester of Benoit in 1995 and Willard Jack of Belzoni in 2001.

Batson's nursery, 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, manger 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.

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Note to media: GreenForest Nursery, Inc., owned by Dan Batson will be visited by the judges on Thursday, Aug. 12 from 8 a.m. until 11 a.m. The nursery is located at 1478 Old Hwy 26, Perkinston, MS 39573. If you would like to visit the nursery during the judging, please call Janie Batson at 704-788-7026, or contact her by e-mail at jbbatson@ctc.net, or contact Dan Batson by calling 601-928-7266.