

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year

Press Release
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For Immediate Release

DAVID WRIGHT NAMED 2009 ALABAMA FARMER OF THE YEAR

A farm accident at age 14 left David Wright of Plantersville, Ala., without his right arm. He now looks back and says the accident was best thing that could have happened to him.

The accident helped him focus on developing his nursery and greenhouse business. His Wright's Nursery and Greenhouse operation now has 92,000 square feet in greenhouse production and a half-acre of land for growing plants outside. He grows a wide variety of annuals, perennials, herbs and vegetables. His best sellers are impatiens in the spring and pansies in the fall. He says, "You won't see any operation in the U.S. this small with this much automation."

As a result of his success with his nursery and greenhouses, Wright has been selected as the 2009 Alabama winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award. Wright now joins nine other state winners from the Southeast as finalists for the award. The overall winner will be announced on Tuesday, Oct. 20 at the Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

"I lost my arm in 1966 when it was caught in the drive shaft of a corn sheller," he recalls. "I was a mediocre student, but after I lost my arm I felt I needed a college degree. Also, my dad was a mechanic by day and a farmer by night, and he was planning to build a new shop. After I recovered, I asked him to build a greenhouse instead. He built the greenhouse so I could learn to use my left hand. So, if not for losing my arm, I would not be in the greenhouse business, I would not have gone to college and would not have met my wife. I owe a lot to the Good Lord for taking my arm."

He graduated with a horticulture degree from Auburn University where he met his wife Martha. He adds that learning to type with one hand was one of his greatest accomplishments.

His first greenhouse was modest, only 32- by 16-feet. It was warmed by a space heater taken from his dad's home. Ventilation came from a window fan from his grandfather's home. Over the years, he replaced old greenhouses with modern ones in a central location.

As Wright took over the business from his dad, he eliminated landscaping and retail sales to concentrate on wholesale customers. Quitting the retail business was a difficult

decision because his retail customers were longtime friends who provided much-needed cash flow. Yet the decision was profitable because selling retail was a high-cost business. In the year following this switch, Wright increased both his production area and gross sales by a third, but his profits went up 400%.

In 2002, he began labeling his bedding plants with the Alabama Grown™ logo. He maintains a fleet of trucks to deliver plants to garden center customers throughout Central and North Alabama. He also maintains a Web site, www.wrightgardens.com, which drives business to his mail order subsidiary.

Automation is important for his business. His employees handle plant trays two times, compared to nine times prior to the adoption of modern greenhouse machinery. “Modernization and efficiency have kept us in business,” he says.

Many people contributed to his success. Others in the greenhouse industry shared their knowledge with him, and Wright willingly shares his own expertise with others in the industry. “We have no secrets,” he adds.

“We produce a premium product,” he says. “Your worst competition is yourself, in thinking that you can’t do it. And we financed this business the old fashioned way. If we made a dollar, 90 cents went back into the business. We’ve grown without a lot of outside financing.”

Wright owns 1,403 acres of well-managed pine trees, and his timberland is designated a Treasure Forest in Alabama. He says he hasn’t borrowed money since 1988 when he bought a large tract. “I financed it until I sold the timber. Then I owned it free and clear,” he recalls.

“We’ve planted pines almost every year,” he says. “We’ve used government programs to help with site preparation and planting. We also use timely thinning. My hobby is running a bulldozer, pushing up dead trees and maintaining roads to help the loggers.” As a deer hunter, Wright is proud of helping an elderly lady in his community shoot her 100th deer on his property.

One of his biggest challenges came in 2000 when officials banned outside watering. “This devastated our fall business,” he recalls. In response, he helped persuade Auburn University to conduct an economic impact study of the state’s green industry. It showed a \$1.9 billion positive impact on the Alabama economy.

Finding reliable labor was initially a challenge. It took a while, but he identified and hired willing workers. He now offers them health insurance and a retirement plan. “We pay wages well above industry standards,” he says. “The same group has worked for us many years.” In 1979, he hired Ed Smith, his first full time employee. Wright says, “Ed is my right arm.”

Wright added innovations to help him achieve production goals. These include building a one-roof facility with a loading dock in 1983, using flat fillers in 1984, computerizing orders and billing in 1985, using plug production to expand the transplanting window in 1987, adding watering booms for plugs in 1988, installing rolling benches to add growing space in 1989, building naturally vented greenhouses in 1990, automating transplant systems in 1996, automating greenhouse watering systems in 2000, adding more rolling benches in 2006 and using automated fogging to increase the efficiency of chemical applications in 2008.

Wright is a member of Plantersville Baptist Church. He's an advisor to the Maplesville High School Agriscience Dept. He is active in the Alabama Farmers Federation, the Alabama Nursery and Landscape Association and in supporting Auburn University horticulture programs. His operation has been featured in the *Ornamental Outlook*, *Grower Talks* and *Southeastern Floriculture* trade publications.

His wife Martha graduated from Auburn with an ornamental horticulture degree and helps in the business. She is active in Plantersville Baptist Church, and is a member of the Chilton County Historical Society.

The Wrights have two grown children. Their daughter Diane pursued a career off the farm. Their son Davy and his wife Heather are both involved in the business. Davy works as sales and marketing manager. Wright's mother, Adelle Wright, also works in the greenhouses each spring.

Paul Till, administrator with the Alabama Farmers Federation, is state coordinator of the Farmer of the Year award. Robert Utsey, an Alabama Farmers Federation area organization director, nominated Wright for the award. Utsey says he admires the Wrights for their pride in producing quality plants, their teamwork and their Christian values.

"Our business is superb," Wright says. "We haven't been hurt by the economic downturn. My daddy used to say, 'if it's not worth working hard for, it's not worth having.'" He has no plans to increase the size of his business, but constantly evaluates new technology to improve its efficiency. It's obvious that the one-armed Wright is on the right track.

As the Alabama state winner of the Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo award, Wright 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 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 20th consecutive year. Swisher has contributed some \$764,000 in cash awards and other honors to southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Previous state winners from Alabama include: Ricky Wiggins of Anderson, 1990; George Kiser, Sr. of Foley, 1991; Allen Bragg of Toney, 1992; Sykes Martin of Courtland, 1993; David Pearce of Browns, 1994; Glenn Jones of Blountsville, 1995; Raymond Jones of Huntsville, 1996; Dan Miller of Greensboro, 1997; Homer Tate of Meridianville, 1998; Eugene Glenn of Hillsboro, 1999; George T. Hamilton of Hillsboro, 2000; Bert Driskell of Grand Bay, 2001; Charles Burton of Lafayette, 2002; Bruce Bush of Eufaula, 2003; John B. East of Leesburg, 2004; James A. Wise of Samson, 2005; Glenn Forrester of Columbia, 2006; Billy Gilley of Holly Pond, 2007 and Lamar Dewberry of Lineville, 2008.

Alabama has had one overall winner with Raymond Jones of Huntsville being selected as the Southeastern Farmer of the Year in 1996.

Wright'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. 10-14. The judges for this year include Elwyn Deal, a retired Clemson University Extension leader from Anderson, S.C.; James Lee Adams, a farmer from Camilla, Ga., and the overall winner of the award in 2000; and Jim Bone, manager of field development for DuPont Crop Protection from Valdosta, Ga.

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Note to media: David Wright's greenhouse operation will be visited by the judges on Tuesday, Aug. 11 from 12:45 p.m. until 3:45 p.m. Wright's business is located at 201 Pecan Road, Plantersville, AL 36758. 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@etc.net, or contact the Wrights by calling 334-366-4795.

