

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo
Southeastern Farmer Of The Year

News Release
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ARKANSAN BRIAN KIRKSEY
NAMED SWISHER SWEETS/SUNBELT EXPO
SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR
FOR 2008

Moultrie, Ga.—Surrounded by forests while living and working in a remote rural area with few natural farming resources, hard working fourth generation Arkansas farmer Brian Kirksey has been selected as the overall winner of the 2008 Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award.

Kirksey operates a plant nursery near the town of Amity. He raises ornamental and landscape plants outside and in 20 greenhouses for sale to his wholesale customers. In addition, he raises horses, beef cattle, hay and pine trees on his family's 305-acre farm.

J. Thomas Ryan, president of Swisher International, Inc., of Jacksonville, Fla., announced Kirksey as the winner while speaking at the Willie B. Withers Sunbelt Expo Luncheon held during the opening day of the 2008 Sunbelt Ag Expo farm show in Moultrie, Ga.

Swisher International and the Sunbelt Expo have sponsored the award for the past 19 years. Kirksey is the first overall winner to come from Arkansas.

“Brian Kirksey and his family represent the best of American agriculture,” said Ryan. “They are outstanding family farmers who contribute to their state, their community and to the agricultural industry. They truly represent excellence in agricultural production. Our company and our Swisher Sweets cigar brand are honored to recognize this family's many accomplishments.”

“I am very honored to have been selected for this award,” said Kirksey. “I am especially humbled after meeting and getting to know the other nine state winners. They are all outstanding farmers and leaders, all with supportive, loving families, and I am pleased to be honored along with them.”

Kirksey was selected for the honor by a panel of judges who personally evaluated the farming operations of ten state winners from the Southeast before selecting Kirksey. These state winners come from the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

The judging team included Jim Butler, a retired USDA agricultural engineer and research leader; Elwyn Deal, a retired Clemson University Extension leader; and James Lee Adams, a farmer from Camilla, Ga., and the overall winner of the award in 2000.

They were impressed with the hard work Kirksey and his family have put into their horticulture business, and how they started it and built it with little in the way of initial resources. The judges were also impressed with the level of community service performed by Kirksey.

For instance, Kirksey works part time as manager of the Alpine Water Association serving some 300 customers. This endeavor allowed Kirksey to invest in a backhoe to use on his own farm and to use in serving customers of Alpine Water.

His greenhouses cover about 70,000 square feet of space. “We created a business in the middle of nowhere,” says Kirksey. “We sell to customers in Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas. We do our own trucking and deliver directly to our customers.

Kirksey literally built his own customer base. After building his own greenhouses, Kirksey started building greenhouses for his customers, and has built more than 500 of them in a three-state area. This sideline created capital he used to buy land and cattle.

Farming practices he uses have benefited the environment. For instance, plastic film that covers his greenhouses is later used to protect his round hay bales. He also re-uses about 75% of the pond water used for irrigation.

Kirksey is active in a number of organizations, including South Central Rural Electric Co-op, Clark County Soil Conservation District, Farm Credit advisory board, Caddo River Consortium, Clark County Cattlemen’s Association, Arkansas Electric Cooperative Corporation, Arkansas Green Industry, Arkansas Rural Water Association, Arkansas State Plumbing Association and Arkansas Farm Bureau.

His wife Nan has been a local school board member and currently works as a traveling teacher for children with special education needs. Their daughter, Kathryn attends Henderson State University and their son John Brian is an eighth grade student. The family has been a strong supporter of local FFA and the entire family enjoys horse riding.

Kirksey says he could have doubled the size of his horticultural business, but didn’t. “Family is very important to me,” he says. “I coach my kids’ ball teams. This farm has provided a great life for us and our kids.”

As the Southeastern Farmer of the Year, Kirksey will receive a \$14,000 cash award from Swisher International. He will also receive the use of a tractor of his choice for a year from Massey Ferguson North America, gift certificates totaling \$1,000 from Southern States and a custom made Canvasback gun safe from Misty Morn Safe Co. He will also receive a jacket, \$500 gift certificate and \$500 in cash from the Williamson-Dickie clothing company.

Kirksey is the second state winner from Arkansas. Other state winners this year include Lamar Dewberry of Lineville, Ala., Randy Strode of Longwood, Fla., Wayne McKinnon of Douglas, Ga., Loretta Lyons of Tompkinsville, Ky., Gibb Steele III of Hollandale, Miss., V. Mac Baldwin of Yanceyville, N.C., Kent Wannamaker of St. Matthews, S.C., Jerry Ray of Tullahoma, Tenn., and Timothy Stuphin of Dublin, Va.

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