

Green jackets of 2012



MAXWELL WATKINS



STEVE DIXON



MONTY RAST

By BRAD HAIRE

KENTUCKY Farmer of the Year Jim Sidebottom's granddaughter Maddie had it right when she told her granddaddy he'd get a green jacket and not even have to play golf, referring to a golf club in Augusta, Ga., that famously cloaks the winner of its annual spring tournament, which draws the most accomplished golfers in the world, in a green sports coat. For being chosen as a state winner of the 2012 Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year award, each of the 10 state farmers gets a prized green jacket, too.

Each state winner also gets \$2,500 in cash and an expense-paid trip to the Sunbelt Ag Expo from Swisher International of Jacksonville, Fla.; a \$500 gift certificate from the Southern States Cooperative; and the choice of either \$1,000 in PhytoGen cottonseed or a \$500 donation to a designated charity on behalf of Dow AgroSciences. Courtesy of Ivey's Outdoor and Farm Supply, each farmer and the person who nominated him will receive a Columbia Cathedral Peak Vest.

The overall winner, announced at a luncheon at the Sunbelt Ag Expo Oct. 16, will get \$15,000. Other prizes for the

overall winner include the use of a Massey Ferguson tractor for a year from Massey Ferguson North America, another \$500 gift certificate from the Southern States Cooperative, and the choice of either another \$1,000 in PhytoGen cottonseed or a second \$500 donation to a designated charity on behalf of Dow AgroSciences. Ivey's Outdoor and Farm Supply will also provide the overall winner with a Columbia Steen's Mountain Tech Full Zip Jacket.

Swisher International, through its Swisher Sweets cigar brand, and the Sunbelt Ag Expo are sponsoring the Southeastern Farmer of the Year awards for the 23rd consecutive year. Swisher has contributed \$884,000 in cash awards and other honors to Southeastern farmers since the award was initiated in 1990.

Here's a look at this year's state winners:

■ **Maxwell Watkins, Virginia**, is a sixth-generation farmer who raises crops on acreage granted to his family by the king of England. Watkins farms 2,800 acres — almost 2,700 acres of rented land and 115 acres of owned land. Last year's crops included soybeans on 1,490 acres, wheat on 587 acres, cotton on 426 acres, corn on 251 acres and flue-cured tobacco on 60 acres. Per-acre yields were 39 bushels for soybeans, 132 bushels for corn, 86 bushels

for wheat, 776 pounds for cotton and 3,250 pounds for tobacco. Watkins also raises fescue and ladino clover hay on 85 acres. He maintains a beef herd of 35 cows.

■ **Steve Dixon, Tennessee**, has farmed for 31 years and runs a diversified farm with row crops, livestock and an agritourism enterprise. Last year, he farmed 945 acres — 791 acres of rented land and 154 acres of owned land. His crops included 550 acres of corn, yielding 140 bushels per acre; 225 acres of full-season soybeans, yielding 28 bushels per acre; 325 acres of double-cropped soybeans, yielding 38 bushels per acre; and 225 acres of wheat, yielding 94 bushels per acre. Drought reduced his soybean yields last year. They normally produce at least 40 bushels per acre.

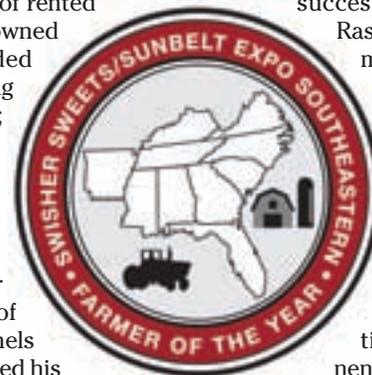
■ **Monty Rast, South Carolina**, used the discipline he learned as a business management major at The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, to develop a modern farm and several farm-related businesses. A farmer for 29 years, he farmed 1,800 acres of rented land last year.

His per-acre crop yields included 4,200 pounds of peanuts from 700 acres, 1,050 pounds of lint from 700 acres of cotton, 198 bushels of corn from 250 acres and 73 bushels of wheat from 250 acres. Half his cropland is irrigated.

"My dedicated employees and business partners are responsible for any farming success I may have had," says Rast. "This is their award as much as it is mine."

■ **Gary Blake, North Carolina**, bought eroded land overgrown with kudzu in 1978 and transformed it into a modern diversified farm. Four generations of his family live on the farm, and three generations manage key components of it. They derive most of their income from raising broiler and pullet chickens. They also raise beef cattle, timber, tobacco, soybeans, field corn, sweet corn and other vegetables.

A full-time farmer for 34 years, Blake's crops last year included corn on 45 acres, yielding 100 bushels per acre; soybeans on 60 acres, yielding 40 bushels per acre; hay and pasture on 286 acres, yielding 5



There's more to farming than the farm

Commentary

By BRAD HAIRE

IT'S hard to get a person's whole story by spending just three or four hours with him. It's harder still to write down all that you learned in that short time. For this year's Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year state nominees — and for most farmers — it is hard to separate family or personal life and business. Their business is mostly family, and it's personal at times.

In the feature profiles on pages 10, 12, 14 and 16 for the Alabama, Kentucky, Florida, Georgia and Tennessee state winners — the states that fall under *Southern Farmer's* coverage area — you'll find out what sort of farms the nominees have, their strategies for making those farms successful and, in some cases, their plans to keep growing or ideas to become more profitable. Strictly business, for the most part. But that isn't the whole story of why they are held up

this year as the best in their areas.

For example, Steve Dixon, Tennessee's Farmer of the Year, told me when I visited him just before the Fourth of July that he planned to spend the day celebrating and having lunch with extended family. But later that day, a holiday, he planned to catch up on some of his farm's record-keeping, going over it and tidying up some office work for future farm decisions. He didn't go to college, but he is a lifelong student and professor of his operation in my book, collecting, checking and rechecking data to make the right decisions for his farm. And when I say "farm," in this case, it means family, too. His son, Andrew, has good a marketing mind, with plans laid out to make the family's agritourism venture a success.

Alabama's nominee, Sam Givhan, is a highly decorated Vietnam War Army pilot. He saw many hairy situations. A bullet missed his head by an inch once on a mission. The plane's windshield shattered. At first, he wasn't sure if he was hit. He was bleeding. He made it back, landed and was



OPEN FARM: Tennessee school kids enjoy a day at Granddaddy's Farm, owned and operated by Steve Dixon and his family.