

Boseman farm: 30 years and counting

By MICHAEL BRANTLEY

JOEL and Jean Boseman have been in farming since the 1970s. You might think after all that time they would just put it in cruise control, do what they've always done and continue with their successful operation.

After all, in that time they've seen tremendous growth in the acreage they tend and the scope of their agribusiness. As newlyweds in 1978, it would have been hard to imagine that by the time they became grandparents, they'd be farming around 10,000 acres; managing a beef herd and a cotton mill; and packing and shipping plants for sweetpotatoes and cucumbers, among other interests.

"We had 41 acres that first year, and we borrowed a tractor from my uncle," says Joel. Jean adds with a laugh, "We thought we were big-time farmers."

Hard work, long hours and personal sacrifice have seen the couple grow from Boseman Farms to adding Battleboro Produce, Carolina's Best Produce and Whitakers Gin Co. One thing that has been the hallmark of their success has been a willingness to shift their focus as needed. Clearly, the hot com-

Key Points

- Sweetpotato demand spiking due to overseas markets.
- Conditions good this year, until the long, dry summer came.
- Bosemans expect better cotton prices to persist in 2011.

modity for the Rocky Mount, N.C.-based Boseman Farms these days is sweetpotatoes.

"We've been planting them since 1989, when we started with 25 acres," Joel says. "It was not a good crop. But we stuck with it, and now we're up to about 1,100 acres. We converted our cucumber packing and shipping plant in 2009 for sweetpotatoes, and we also pack and ship for other growers. The sweetpotato market, especially overseas, made us see that we needed to expand. It is jumping — especially in the United Kingdom, which is where about 50% of ours go. Sweetpotato producers have really just touched the surface overseas. It is such a healthy food, and more people around the world are beginning to realize this."

The Bosemans also sell off the farm, through their produce company, Battleboro Produce, and to



GOING GLOBAL: Joel and Jean Boseman are now shipping about half of their sweetpotato crop to the United Kingdom. Worldwide demand has prompted them to increase production.

the Lone Star Steakhouse chain. Jean says they'd like to go back to offering their own local box, which they used to do years ago, when most of the market was domestic.

Joel says this year's crop was good on quality but just average on yield. The long dry spells of the summer, which affected so many farmers, would have wreaked havoc on the crop had they not done something they'd never had to do in the past.

"We irrigated our sweetpotatoes for the first time," Joel says. "We had 41 center-pivot irrigation pumps going, and it made a difference on how they came out. We got about 550 bushels per acre, and what I'm hearing is that the non-irrigated fields around got about 350 bushels per acre."

Cucumbers and tobacco

While the Bosemans converted their Rocky Mount facility for cucumbers over to tubers, they are still heavy in the cucumber busi-

ness, raising about 3,000 acres. Their packing and shipping is done in Wilson, where they purchased the Vlastic pickle operation in 1998, and have a separate division known as Carolina's Best Produce.

They've also traditionally been in tobacco, but like so many leaf growers, feel upheavals are in the works for the business. They've maintained their acreage of about 560 acres grown on contract for Alliance One and Universal Leaf, but see changes coming across the South.

"There are a lot of farmers disgusted about how it's going after it's kept North Carolina going for so long," Joel says. "It has become so competitive. I think a lot of smaller growers are just going to quit. But we are going to stick with it."

In 2004, they bought out the grower-owned Whitakers Gin Co. Even though the cotton industry has seen wild swings in the past

few years, it has turned out to be a good decision, as the Bosemans gin their own 3,500 acres, and crops for other local farmers. "It's been up and down, but it has paid its way," Jean says. Joel shakes his head at the recent turn in the market, which he doesn't pin to just one factor. "It's been a good year for cotton," he says. "Three years ago, it was 38 cents, this year [late October] it is \$1.38. You can't book it for that right now, so it's not quite as good as it sounds, but it is a lot better than it was."

On the flip side of that, Joel says that his peanuts, which he runs under Battleboro Produce and buys for Severn Peanut Co., have seen a bad year. "It has been a poor year for quality and yield," Joel says. "The ones that were irrigated were average, and the ones that were not were a disaster." Jean adds that conditions also brought out the worst in pests. "Spider mites destroyed a lot of the crop, and they are made worse by the dry weather."

The Bosemans had an average year on beans and a rough one with corn that they'll either greatly reduce it, or quit growing it entirely, using the 1,500 or so acres to plant more cotton, beans or peanuts. "The heat just burnt it up," Joel says. "We averaged 26 bushels an acre."

Interest in cattle

Joel says that as he gets older and turns more of the farm operations over to his son, Jackson, and other key managers, he wants to get more involved with his cattle. His herd of commercial cattle, mostly Angus-Simmental crosses, numbers around 450 head in several locations. After all, being willing to do new things has kept his job interesting and profitable over the years.

"My love of farming has kept me going, and I love the challenges of it," he says. "You can't give up; you've got to keep going."

Brantley writes from Nash County, N.C.



READY FOR TRAVEL: Sweetpotatoes are washed, sorted and sent down the line for packing, palleting and loading at the Boseman Farms packing and shipping plant in Rocky Mount, N.C.

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