

Richardson Farms, *Walton County*



Donnie Richardson raises peanuts, cotton, soybeans, wheat, oats, hay, cattle, and timber on 2000 acres of land he owns and leases in North Walton County. His father, Doyle and sons, Matthew and Aaron are involved in the farming operation. His wife, Sharon, a full time science teacher, helps when possible. Both of his sons attended the University of Florida obtaining B.S. degrees related to agriculture. Matthew's degree emphasis included business, agriculture, natural resources while Aaron's degree was in agricultural and biological engineering.

The Richardson family has been proactive when it comes to implementing new technology and equipment into their operation. The Richardson's were the first ones in the area to do strip-till farming, using a 4-row and 6-row peanut picker. On some of their land they have center pivot low pressure irrigation, utilizing micro-switches (Murphy switches) to protect their system from mechanical failures. Fertilizer is also applied through their irrigation system. GPS guidance systems have been installed on two tractors for navigating the tractors on plot lines in the field and for guiding spray equipment. This system helps to avoid double spraying and ensures complete pesticide coverage in the field. Since it became available they have been using Bt and Roundup ready cottonseed and Roundup ready corn and soybean seed. Donnie Richardson believes in scouting his fields early to stay ahead of insect and disease problems. His chemical and seed dealers also help him scout his fields. Protecting beneficial insects is a priority, for example, using ladybugs for aphid control in cotton. Mr. Richardson has been using

bahiagrass / peanut rotation, since the late 1990's before it became widely researched and publicized. Feeding the family cattle herd became the impetus for developing a hay business which services many local ranches and stables.

Twice a day Mr. Richardson receives a market report on crop prices from the Chicago Board of Trade via his cell phone along with market analysis reports, planting progression, and other reports that affect the market. The Internet is also used to get cattle prices and search the region for high quality bulls.

Mr. Richardson taught his sons at an early age to raise watermelons for the local community. They planted hybrid watermelon seed and were responsible for care, harvesting, and marketing melons. These watermelons were unique to this area and their business thrived. It has been 8 years since they have grown melons, but many folks in the area are still asking for them.

Improving Agriculture through Extension Involvement

The Richardson family has used the services of several extension faculty through the years. Local agents have done soil testing and pesticide training along with field visits scouting for insect disease and weed problems. Richardson also believes research and development is very important for the future of agriculture. Local extension agents and IFAS specialists are always welcome to visit his farm. Dr. Ann Blount, IFAS forages specialist, mentored Richardson's son Aaron for three years as he researched photoperiod and forages. Aaron won second place at the 2002 Intel International Science & Engineering Fair for his project photogenic and cytogenetics of bahiagrass cultivars. IFAS / Extension specialist, Dr. Jimmy Rich (Nematology), worked with Mr. Richardson's son, Matthew on a research project on plant-parasitic nematodes entitled, "Effectiveness of Biofumigants vs. Natural Antagonist for Nematode Management in Tomatoes." Matthew received a first place award in the 2004 International Science and Engineering Fair for his research and received an award from the Society of Nematologists in 2005.

Mr. Richardson helps the Extension office by providing his farm for variety trials and farm tours both locally and

internationally. In 2003, a group of Romanian businessmen and women visited the farm to learn about farming equipment used locally to produce cotton and peanuts. A group of German tourist also visited the farm for several years to learn more about American farming.

Impacting Agriculture in the Northwest District

Richardson positively impacts agriculture in many ways. This producer yearly donates funds to local school science fairs to support and promote agriculture projects. He hosts the local Walton County beauty pageant finalists at his farm teaching them about the history of farming in the region and the aspects of the peanut industry. This is to prepare the beauty pageant participants that are representing Walton County at the National Peanut Festival in Dothan, AL. He has developed a four- page factsheet on peanut production and uses for the contestants. Mr. Richardson has been a presenter for the “Ag in the Classroom” program emphasizing the need for math and science and how these subjects relate to farming. He taught students about agriculture research and how it is needed to increase food production for the growing population. He has spoken to local civic groups promoting the importance of agriculture to our local economy.

Mr. Richardson promotes local agriculture through various boards he has served on. These include: The Northwest Florida State College Foundation Board; Choctawhatchee River Soil and Water Conservation District; Florida Farm Bureau; Farm Service Agency Board; Florida Peanut Producers Association; and the Walton County School Board for 8 years. He also received the award for Walton County Farm Family of the Year for 1988-89. Mr. Richardson has promoted agriculture-based science research projects at the annual regional (Okaloosa/Walton) science fair. Numerous articles about his farming operation have been featured in the magazine, Southern Farmer. His farm was featured four times in 2003.

This farmer demonstrates protection of the environment in several ways. He utilizes the services of NRCS to build and maintain terraces on his land to control erosion, along with strip till practices. He uses scouts to monitors pests vs. beneficial insect ratios to time spraying and uses GPS monitoring to prevent duplication. Farmers in the area often mimic his farming practices as Mr. Richardson is widely-known as one of the best farmers in northwest Florida. ■



Donnie Richardson
DeFuniak Springs, Florida

