Colquitt Co. FFA honors state winners

• ABAC’s Dr. Mary Ellen Hicks, a woman of many talents.
• Moultrie-born scientist uses viruses to improve plants.
• ABAC dedicates Langdale Forest at Willis Still.

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ABAC professor demonstrates array of talents

By Mike Chason

TIFTON – The calf was on the way. But the baby’s mama needed help. Dr. Mary Ellen Hicks was ready.

Students at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College will tell you that Hicks, a much-acclaimed Professor of Animal Science for the past 33 years, is always ready, whether it’s in the classroom, in an advising session, or assisting in the delivery of a new calf on ABAC’s J.G. Woodroof Farm.

“We hope that calf’s mama will get it done on her own, but I do help those that have problems,” Hicks said. “I don’t like spending long nights up here. But it happens. We pull students in on it too. I expect we’ll have close to 100 calves at ABAC this spring.”

Managed by Hicks’ husband, Doug, ABAC’s cattle herd numbers 120 or so. Doug Hicks, an ABAC employee since 2002, is the beef herd manager and in charge of forage production.

“When I started teaching at ABAC in 1989, we had a herd of maybe 25,” Dr. Mary Ellen Hicks said. “The herd had to grow because our number of students has grown. Assisting with the birth process is the reason I went into veterinary medicine. I’m used to it.”

Calves weigh about 75 pounds when they’re born. For the next eight months, their mamas take care of them.

“We don’t do a lot of feeding until they are weaned,” Hicks said. “She’s the primary food source until then. We’ll weigh them in November before they go to a feed yard in Iowa. They’ll leave here at about 750 pounds.

“The steers go to a feed yard in November and then on to a processing plant in May or June of the next year. By that time, they each weigh between 1,200 to 1,400 pounds. ABAC gets paid on the quality of the carcass.”

From birth this spring to the feed yard in November to the processing plant next May to a steak on the plate for your Independence Day celebration. The Circle of Life continues.

“We usually take some ABAC students to Iowa on spring break every year,” Hicks said. “We have visited the large processing facilities. We go to feed yards. Then we go and eat steak at a nice restaurant. “The students get the pasture to plate experience. They see it from start to finish. In fact, they visit the feed yard where our ABAC calves are located.”

Hicks said the students on the trip come to realize that unbelievable opportunities exist in agricultural careers.

“Seeing the big picture is important,” Hicks said. “The diversification of jobs in agriculture these days is quite amazing. Vermeer, who the students also visit with in Pella, Iowa on the spring break trip, is an ABAC partner, and that gets these students into the equipment side of the industry.

“The job opportunities out there are more than anyone could imagine. A lot of our students come in and want to be veterinarians because they like animals. They don’t realize there are many other opportunities out there besides being a vet.”

Hicks knows the path to being a veterinarian quite well. When she graduated from Tift County High School in 1981, she came to ABAC to get her associate degree in pre-veterinary medicine. She continued her education at the University of Georgia where she received her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree in 1988.

Returning to Tifton, she started work at Branch’s Veterinary Clinic.

“I worked in Nashville a good bit when we opened that clinic there,” Hicks said. “I liked it. We were doing what I was trained to do. I did a lot of large animal work.”

Little did Hicks know that her life was about to take a turn. Through a series of events, a faculty position in the animal science program as well as the veterinary technology program opened at ABAC in September of 1989.

“I was licensed as a veterinarian, so I was able to take over without any problems,” Hicks said. “I had left the practice to pursue a master’s degree in animal science, so I was available at the time.

“Teaching at ABAC was fun. I liked what I was doing. I had students who were non-traditional who were almost my age. It was time consuming but not difficult. I still had a strong memory of being in a college classroom which assisted me with teaching.”
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Hicks

ABAC had hogs and cattle on the Woodroof Farm at the time, and Hicks ran prevention type herd health campaigns, delivered vaccinations, handled emergencies, and did general management of the program.

Time marches on but the students keep coming. ABAC now enrolls almost 4,000 students from 155 of Georgia’s 159 counties, 52 of Florida’s 67 counties, 19 countries, and 18 states. Always observing and analyzing, Hicks sees a different type of student today.

“More of the students today have a limited livestock background, particularly on the food animal side,” Hicks said. “More of them are from urban areas. We still have those who come from genuine farm backgrounds but even those students don’t seem to have as much true experience with animals. “I spend more time with the basics. It’s just different.”

Because of some of the students’ lack of experience with raising animals, they find a harsh reality when they dive into the animal science program. “Sometimes we have to make a decision that an animal’s quality of life is over,” Hicks said. “These animals must be euthanized. Some of the students have never experienced death before.”

Hicks is the only faculty member in the history of ABAC to be honored with all three top awards that faculty members can receive. She received the 2011 W. Bruce and Rosalyn Donaldson Award for Excellence in Advising, the 2013 W. Bruce and Rosalyn Donaldson Award for Teaching Excellence, and the 2019 W. Bruce and Rosalyn Donaldson Award for Excellence in Student Engagement.

“It’s humbling,” Hicks said. “And it’s not just the awards themselves. It’s the connection to Ms. Donaldson. To me, that’s what makes the awards special. Her approval means everything to me. She is just the epitome of the Southern woman. “I had her in class when I was an ABAC student, and I still remember those classes very well.”

Hicks has plenty enough years in to retire from ABAC. But she still has the zest for her job. Ironically, it was the pandemic that recharged her.

“Before Covid, I had just gotten tired,” Hicks said. “Then that spring semester (2020), I had to learn to teach in a different manner—virtually. Doug and I finished the calving season by ourselves. I know retirement is going to happen one day. I just don’t know when.”

“I have enjoyed my life at ABAC. It’s the type of place that hits everything on my check list. I have students who want to learn. I have a background in the community. I grew up here. There has always been a purpose here.”
The desire for fresh homegrown tomatoes is probably the main reason homeowners have gardens. Most plants are planted in late March and April, or when they are available at the garden centers. Each spring, many homeowners run into disease problems with their plants.

Red Bounty has resistance to a very common tomato disease called Tomato Spotted Wilt Virus while many varieties sold do not have that resistance. Tomato Spotted Wilt Virus is spread by a small insect called a thrip. This disease can easily infect half of your tomato plants.

In general, tomatoes are susceptible to a lot of diseases and many varieties come with resistance to many diseases.

When selecting your plants look for varieties that have a lot of letters next to the name. This means that plants have a built-in resistance to disease. An example would be a popular variety called Celebrity VFFNTA Hybrid. The letters stand for the following:

- **V** = Verticillium Wilt
- **F** = Fusarium Wilt
- **FF** = Fusarium Wilt race 1 and 2
- **N** = Nematode
- **T** = Tobacco Mosaic Virus
- **A** = Alternaria (Early Blight)
- **TSW** = Tomato Spotted Wilt

As you can see Celebrity is resistant to several diseases but lacks resistance to Fusarium Wilt and Tomato Spotted Wilt Virus. Tomatoes are classified as determinate which means most of the fruit ripens over a short period of time, and indeterminant, which means that fruit will continually be produced.

Popular determinate varieties include: Bush Celebrity VFFNT Hybrid, Bush Early Girl VFFNT Hybrid, Celebrity VFFNTA Hybrid, and Mountain Spring VFF Hybrid. Popular indeterminant varieties are: Early Girl VFF Hybrid, Better Boy VFN Hybrid, Big Boy Hybrid, and Beefmaster VFN Hybrid.

Cherry tomato varieties are: Jolly Hybrid, Sweet Baby Girl Hybrid and Super Sweet 100 Hybrid. Of course, there are many more to choose from.

Cultural practices will also prevent problems.

Tomatoes like a well-drained high organic matter soil and a pH between 6.2 and 6.8. I would recommend you have a soil test done for your garden and follow any recommendations. A soil test can correct any pH problems.

Tomatoes frequently have a problem with a condition called “Blossom End Rot.” This is when the bottom of the tomato turns black. Blossom end rot is caused by a calcium deficiency in the fruit and is made worse when soil conditions fluctuate between wet and dry. Additions of dolomitic lime, which raises pH and contains calcium and Magnesium, can help prevent the problem.

If your soil pH is optimal but your calcium is low, apply gypsum at one pound per 100 square feet. Foliar applications of calcium can help provide a temporary fix if the problem is not excessive.

Mulching around your tomato plants reduces soil moisture fluctuations and keeps the weed pressure down.

Layers of newspaper can be placed around plants and mulch can be added on top to further prevent weeds. Pine straw, bark, leaves or most any type of mulch will be OK.

Selecting disease resistant varieties, mulching and following your soil test results should make your tomato season more productive. For more information on tomatoes and varieties visit this website: https://secure.caes.uga.edu/extension/publications/files/pdf/B%201271_6.PDF

Jake Price is a University of Georgia extension agent/coordinator for Lowndes County. He may be reached at jprice@uga.edu.

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Perry family honored twice

MOULTRE, Ga. — A Colquitt County family received two prestigious awards in April.

Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College alumni presented the Perry Family with its Family Legacy Award, recognizing multiple generations who have attended and supported the Tifton school. It was presented during an awards luncheon April 1, part of ABAC’s Homecoming 2022 celebration.

Then on April 5, Louie Perry III was named Colquitt County’s Conservationist of the Year by the Middle South Georgia Soil and Water Conservation District.

Four generations of the Perry family have attended ABAC. Schley L. Perry Sr. graduated from the Second District A&M School in 1921. He often shared his memory of being part of the student crew that built the amphitheater during his time on the ABAC campus. He studied agriculture and returned home to the family farm after college.

“One of the highlights of Homecoming every year is the opportunity to celebrate outstanding ABAC alumni,” Dr. Deidre Martin, chief advancement officer, said. “From young alumni just beginning their careers to individuals with a lifelong history of excellence, we honored an outstanding group of alumni who are truly making a difference in their professions and their communities.”

The Perry family farm is the longest continuous business in the area, which was formerly Thomas County and now Colquitt County. Pineywoods Hunting Club was created by Schley Perry Sr., and later the name was once again used to rename the farm to Pineywoods Farm. Pineywoods Farm was awarded the Centennial Family Farm Award in 2020, given to farms in operation for at least 100 years and listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Please see PERRY, Page 9

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Continued from Page 8

Perry

Harris Perry, brother to Schley L. Perry Sr., graduated from the Second District A&M School in 1923. His son, Frank Perry, also attended ABAC.

Schley L. Perry Jr. graduated from ABAC in 1959. After graduating from ABAC, Perry went to the University of Georgia and graduated in 1961 with a degree in agronomy before returning to the family farm. His professional honors include Colquitt County Farmer of the Year and the Southern Cotton Growers Service Award.

Serving in leadership roles on the Georgia Cotton Commission, Cotton Incorporated, and Georgia Cattlemen’s Association, Perry’s ABAC honors include the Master Farmer Award in 1966 and the J. Lamar Branch for Leadership in Agriculture Award in 2010.

Schley L. Perry III and Jonathan Perry, the sons of Schley L. Perry Jr., also attended ABAC in the 1980s. Schley L. Perry III graduated from the University of Georgia in 1989 and is the principal and director of Cornerstone Government Affairs in Washington, DC.

Jonathan Perry is the general manager of Deer Valley Farm in Fayetteville, Tenn., and the owner of the Hickory House restaurant in Pulaski, Tenn.

The fourth generation of the Perry Family to attend ABAC includes William J. “Bill” Johnson and Elizabeth “Libba” Johnson. Bill is pursuing a degree in agribusiness, and Libba is pursuing a degree in agricultural communications.

Their father, David S. Johnson, graduated from ABAC in the early 1980s. Their mother, Laura Perry Johnson, is associate dean for Extension at the University of Georgia, a strong advocate for agriculture across the state, and a friend of ABAC.

Conservationist

Louie Perry III of Pinewood Farms was honored as Colquitt County Conservationist of the Year by the Middle South Georgia Soil and Water Conservation District at the Conservationist of the Year Banquet, held at Southern Woods Plantation in Sylvester April 5.

Among Perry’s conservation practices that led to his award were prescribed burns and selective thinning of pines, rotational grazing cattle pastures, and planting grasses in waterways along with cover crops in row crop fields, according to a press release from the Soil and Water Conservation District.

The Middle South Georgia Soil and Water Conservation District is a local unit of state government dedicated to the conservation and stewardship of the area’s natural resources. Its service area includes Ben Hill, Brooks, Colquitt, Crisp, Irwin, Thomas, Tift, Turner and Worth counties, and it recognized a Conservationist of the Year from each of those counties April 5.

The 2020 Conservationist of the Year Banquet was canceled due to COVID-19 therefore, the 2020 recipients were honored at this year’s banquet, the SWCD press release said.

The Conservation District works with farmers, landowners, and with other units of government to educate and actively promote programs and practices that support the conservation, use and development of soil, water, and related resources.

Continued from Page 8

Middle South Georgia Soil and Water Conservation District

The Middle South Georgia Soil and Water Conservation District’s Colquitt County Supervisor Preston Jimmerson, right, congratulates Mr. and Mrs. Louie Perry III after Perry was named Colquitt County’s Conservationist of the Year.
Winzell named ag student of distinction

Staff Reports

TIPTON, Ga. — Lindsey Winzell, an agricultural education major from Cairo, has been selected as the student of distinction for the School of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College.

Students of distinction are chosen by faculty through a competitive process, college officials said in a statement.

They must first be a superior or distinguished honor student with a grade point average of 3.5 or higher. Many other factors are considered during the selection, including involvement in engaged academic learning activities, active participation on campus in clubs and school/college activities, service to the community, leadership among peers and strong interpersonal skills.

Winzell is finishing her internship at Bainbridge High School, while completing an impact analysis study during her student teaching experience. She has participated in both the ABAC Horticulture Club and FFA, taking an active part in club activities.

While serving as the SANR senator in the ABAC Student Government Association, Winzell was also the social chair for Sigma Alpha Sorority. Her involvement in the wider community has included volunteer work directing teen contests at the Sunbelt Ag Expo and serving as a recruiter and twice as a judge for National FFA Convention events.

Winzell was described by one reference as attentive, upbeat, a leader among her peers and an over-achiever. She received a medallion and a certificate from Dr. Mark Kistler, dean of the School of Agriculture and Natural Resources, at the recent academic awards ceremony in Tift Hall.

Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College photo

Dr. Mark Kistler, dean of the ABAC School of Agriculture and Natural Resources, congratulates Lindsey Winzell with the student of distinction award.
Staff Reports

MACON, Ga. – The Georgia Foundation for Agriculture and Georgia Electric Membership Corporation (EMC) are jointly promoting agricultural literacy by donating copies of the children’s book “How to Grow a Monster” to nearly 400 libraries in the Georgia Public Library Service (GPLS).

The Georgia Foundation for Agriculture (GFA) and Georgia EMC have given each county Farm Bureau in Georgia enough books for every public library in the county. Colquitt EMC and Colquitt County Farm Bureau recently delivered a copy of the book to the Moultrie-Colquitt County Library.

“How to Grow a Monster,” written by Kiki Thorpe and illustrated by Barbara Bongini, explores the theme of gardening and includes a gardening-related activity for children to try themselves, according to a press release from the Georgia Farm Bureau. Tapping into the popular makers movement (hands-on learning), the book is part of a series of fun, easy-to-read stories that focus on problem-solving and hands-on action. The American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture selected the book as its 2022 Book of the Year for its accurate and positive portrayal of agriculture.

“The GFA is thrilled to partner with Georgia EMC and Georgia Farm Bureau to donate the book,” the release said. “The GFA began donating accurate books about agriculture to each public library in Georgia in 2016. Georgia EMC joined the foundation in this endeavor in 2018.”

Staff Reports

VALDOSTA, Ga. – Lowndes County Extension has announced an addition to its team.

Emily Menno serves as Lowndes County 4-H educator, extension service representatives said in a statement.

She received a bachelor of science in agriculture with a concentration in livestock production from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in 2020.

Menno comes from Florida and has experience in many different agricultural fields with a special emphasis in cattle and citrus, representatives said.

“Having grown up in agriculture, she feels it is important to educate our youth and community about the impact it has in our society,” according to the statement. “She looks forward to using her experience and skills to build many great relationships in Lowndes County.”

Lowndes welcomes new 4-H educator

Submitted photo

Emily Menno is the Lowndes County 4-H educator.

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Colquitt County FFA celebrates multiple winners

By Jack R. Jordan
jack.jordan@gafUnews.com

MOULTON, Ga. — The Colquitt County FFA is celebrating a successful year. The long lasting program is celebrating a top 10 national Career Development Education placement along with a state champion Livestock Evaluation team, a state champion State Creed Speaking Competition and multiple top-three-placing State finishers.

Along with their area, state and national accolades, individuals such as Carolyne Turner of the Livestock Evaluation team and LeAnna Gay were among the top scoring individuals in their respective categories. The program also saw 13 of its students complete their FFA state degrees and three out of the five proficiency awards were first place placements. The other two were second place.

The teachers are Will Burt, Michael Schwarz and Hannah Roberts.

Top-3 state teams and individuals

- 1st Place, Livestock Evaluation: Carolyne Turner (Second highest scoring individual), Christie Deariso, Baylee Tatum, Laurie Jo Burt.
- 1st Place, State Creed Speaking Competition: Anna Grace Hunter.
- 2nd Place, Floriculture: LeAnna Gay (Second highest scoring individual), Mason Bass, Alaina Riley, Price Jarvis.

Individual proficiency winners

- 1st, Bobby Mitchell, Vegetable Crop Production.
- 2nd, Carter Thompson, Fiber and Oil Crop Production.
- 3rd, Baylee Tatum, Goat Production.

South Region Star in ag placement

- Logan Bennett

State FFA degree recipients

- Maggie Bishop.
- Jordan Hudson.
- LeAnna Gay.
- Logan Bennett.
- Brock Weaver.
- Aaron Carter.
- Mason Bass.
- Daniel Durrence.
- Laine Weeks.
- Emma Roland.

Top-2 area teams and individuals

- 1st Place, Farm Business Management: Logan Bennett, Aaron Carter, Daniel Durrence.
- 2nd, Laurie Burt, Diversified Livestock.
- 3rd, Logan Bennett, Diversified Crop Production.
- Samantha Najar.
- Cheyanna Johnson.

EMC Wiring.
- Ag Marketing.
- Ag Sales.
- Prepared Public Speaking.
- Tractor Driving.

All third-place placement teams

- Meats Judging: Jessie Blair, Maycie Rowell, Edgar Rivera, Devon Sheffield.
- Job Interview: Carolyne Turner.
- Ag Communications: Daley Dalton, Laurie Jo Burt, Maycie Rowell, Allie Hurst.
- Poultry Judging: Mason Bass, Christie Deariso, Bo Demott, Carter Thompson.

Top-3 state teams and individuals

- 2nd Place, Floriculture: LeAnna Gay, Alaina Riley and Mason Bass.
- 3rd Place, Nursery Landscape: Aaron Carter, Ava Croft, Kale Hopper, Aurora Jones.

Top-2 area teams and individuals

- 1st Place, Farm Business Management: Logan Bennett, Aaron Carter, Daniel Durrence.
- 2nd Place, Floriculture: LeAnna Gay, Alaina Riley and Mason Bass.
- 3rd Place, Agricultural Mechanics: Mason Bass, Carter Thompson, Gavin Ragland, West Roundtree.

All first-place placement teams

- Welding.
- Livestock Evaluation.
- Forestry Field Day.
- Veterinary Science.
- Floriculture.
- Nursery Landscape.
- Ag Electrification/Electronics.

All second-place placement teams

- Ag Mechanics.
- Welding.
- Forestry.
- Horse Judging.
- Lawn Mower Operations.
MOULTREI, Ga. — Colquitt County 4-H students have been busy participating in District Project Achievement. In February, students in grades 10-12 went to Rock Eagle for the weekend to Junior/Senior DPA. Students in grades 4-6 attended Cloverleaf DPA March 19 in Perry, Ga. They worked hard preparing speeches, presentations, portfolios, and posters for their demonstrations, a press release from Colquitt County Farm Bureau said. The students presented in front of judges, as well as other competitors and parents.

“This helps 4-H’ers develop skills in public speaking, cooking, stage performance, and time management, all of which will serve them well in the future,” the release said.

Attending with the group was UGA Extension 4-H Agent Valerie Bennett, UGA Extension 4-H Educator Jordan Jones, and Greta Collins of the Colquitt County Farm Bureau.

The following students represented Colquitt County at their respective 4-H DPAs:

**CLOVERLEAF**
- Maggie Bozeman, 3rd - Dog Care
- Lara Collins, 1st - Forestry
- Abigail Cox, 1st - Crafts
- Libba Dykes, 2nd - Sheep and Goats
- Emmy Howell - Performing Arts, General
- Kayleigh Morris, 2nd - Current People and Places
- Ellie Reese Niday, 2nd - Sports
- Arianna Stanford, 3rd - Cat Care
- Maddie Stearns - Outdoor Recreation
- Eriahna Terry, 1st - Cat Care

**SENIORS**
- Langley Bennett - Festive Foods
- Emma Kirkley, 3rd - Performing Arts, General
- Rosalyn Roberson, 3rd - Performing Arts, Vocal
- Lily Watson, 1st - Fruits, Vegetables and Nuts
- Landen Wiggins, Sports

Lily Watson will represent Colquitt County 4-H at State Congress in July.
ABAC dedicates Langdale Forest at Willis Still

TIPTON, Ga. — With a brilliant canopy of blue sky covering 944 acres of timberland, Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College dedicated ABAC’s John W. and Margaret Jones Langdale Forest at Willis Still.

“Students of the past, present and future need to understand the sacrifice, investment and gift of money, mind and effort that has already been invested in the John W. and Margaret Jones Langdale Forest at Willis Still,” ABAC President David Bridges said as he stood under a giant sand post oak tree on the property.

“This investment has been made in order to provide the best opportunity for hands-on, real-life experiences in the conservation and managed productivity of Georgia’s precious natural resources. The assets developed on this site will provide a comprehensive living classroom for students for years to come.”

With a barrel of resin and other turpentine-harvesting equipment in front of his microphone, Bridges pointed out the long history of the Langdale family with ABAC and the forest industry, college officials said in a statement.

“The Langdale family is intricately woven into the fabric of ABAC,” Bridges said. “ABAC has had no greater friends or loyal supporters than the Langdale family. No president has ever enjoyed a closer and more supportive relationship than I have had with Johnny, Wesley and Jim Langdale.

“ABAC’s ongoing relationship with the Langdale Company, the Harley Langdale Jr. Foundation and members of the Langdale family is deep and wide. Therefore, it is only appropriate that we formally dedicate this important educational resource in the memory of John W. and Margaret Jones Langdale.”

It was Bridges who announced at the finale of the 61st Annual Southern Forestry Conclave on March 24, 2018, that the ABAC Foundation had purchased the timberland just off Willis Still Road in Tift County for the forest.

Since that time, ABAC students have used the forest for laboratory experiences in many of the programs in the School of Agriculture and Natural Resources including forestry, wildlife and conservation law enforcement.

“Because of the Langdale Forest, we have been able to centralize our labs,” Dr. William Moore, head of the ABAC Department of Forest Resources, said. “It gives us a lot more leeway and flexibility. We have student engagement happening on our own property.”

“Trees cover 60 to 70% of the landscape but the property also includes two fields, several pastures and two ponds, “one of those a 15-acre masterpiece of nature,” college officials said. “Deer, gopher tortoises, mourning doves, turkeys and quail have been sighted in the forest, and other species of wildlife should thrive in the tall stands of timber.”

In his dedication remarks, Bridges outlined the long history of the property which included ownership by the Willis Naval Stores Company, Wheeler H. and Mattie W. Willis, Henry Banks Allen, W. Wheeler Bryan Sr., and Vicky Bryan Orr, Jennifer Orr Fana and Marie Bryan Hannon and W. Wheeler Bryan Jr.

After comments by the Langdale and Bryan families, Bridges pointed toward the future.

“ABAC has made tremendous commitments to our agriculture and natural resource programs in recent years,” Bridges said. “We will continue to do so because agriculture and forestry are Georgia’s leading industries. Our commitment is for ABAC to be the leading provider of human capital to work, lead and grow these industries.

“This forest is a difference-maker for our graduates. Our programs were already at the head of the class, and ABAC’s John W. and Margaret Jones Langdale Forest at Willis Still pushes us over the top.”
Langdale Foundation backs agriculture for 1,000-plus students

Staff Reports

VALDOSTA, Ga. – More than 1,000 South Georgia third- through fifth-grade students were challenged to put their science, technology, engineering and math skills to work while exploring Georgia agriculture when the Georgia Ag Experience recently visited their schools.

The GAE, an innovative and interactive mobile classroom managed by the Georgia Foundation for Agriculture recently spent 10 days at Berrien, Clinch and Echols County public schools taking students on a deep dive into the state’s largest economic sector with state-of-the-art STEM curriculum.

The 10 days the GAE spent in a concentrated area of Southeast Georgia were made possible through funding from the Harley Langdale Jr. Foundation.

The Harley Langdale Jr. Foundation, based in Lowndes County, is a nonprofit organization that supports education programs, youth programs and other initiatives to foster community improvement primarily in Georgia, organizers said in a statement.

Sponsor funding helps the GFA cover costs of driving the mobile classroom to a community and keeps the school’s fee to bring the classroom low. “Our program is critical to the future of Georgia agriculture as it helps to narrow the gap between farmers who grow food and consumers. Most students are four generations removed from the farm. Now, more than ever, we need to encourage young people to consider the career opportunities in agriculture,” said Lily Baucom, GFA executive director.

A central goal of the Georgia Ag Experience is to reach elementary school students and teachers who lack knowledge of agriculture.

“Prior to receiving a visit from our mobile classroom, the majority of students and teachers indicated in a survey that they knew very little about agriculture,” organizers said. “Additionally, more than 85% of students visiting the classroom in South Georgia are eligible for free and reduced lunch. The program is about sparking a passion for agriculture and empowering students to learn how to grow their own food. The Georgia Ag Experience aims to address these challenges and provide students with what may be their only opportunity for exposure to agriculture in such detail.”

For five days in late February and early March, 512 Berrien Elementary School students visited the Georgia Ag Experience thanks to the Harley Langdale Jr. Foundation serving as a district sponsor to bring the Georgia Foundation for Agriculture’s Georgia Ag Experience mobile classroom to the school.

For three days in early March, 384 Clinch County Middle School students visited the Georgia Ag Experience thanks to the Harley Langdale Jr. Foundation serving as a district sponsor to bring the Georgia Foundation for Agriculture’s Georgia Ag Experience mobile classroom to the school.

For five days in late February and early March, 512 Berrien Elementary School students visited the Georgia Ag Experience thanks to the Harley Langdale Jr. Foundation serving as a district sponsor to bring the Georgia Foundation for Agriculture’s Georgia Ag Experience mobile classroom to the school.

During the Georgia Ag Experience mobile agriculture classroom visit, students engage in self-guided and teacher-led study and activities including eight stations outfitted with STEM technology and digital learning, an Ag Scavenger Hunt, AgBINGO, etc.

STEM stations inside the mobile ag classroom cover a variety of topics including: ag careers, peanuts, cotton, poultry, forestry, horticulture, beef & dairy, fruit, vegetables and pecans. The mobile classroom content and curriculum was carefully developed by ag and education professionals to meet the Georgia curriculum standards. The GAE aims to provide the same educational experience for every student with the goal of increasing students’ knowledge of and attitude toward Georgia agriculture.

“GFA is grateful to have the Harley Langdale Jr. Foundation fund school visits a district sponsor. The Harley Langdale Jr. Foundation understands the value and need of the program we have developed and have now delivered to nearly 17,000 Georgia students in a little over a year,” Baucom said. “Our relationship with the Harley Langdale Jr. Foundation has been a win for the South Georgia region.”
Moultrie native journeys from small farm to groundbreaking scientific research

By Juliana Proffitt McCully
North Carolina State University
College of Agriculture and Life Sciences

RALEIGH, N.C. — Anna Whitfield’s path to studying big questions in agriculture began on a small family farm in Moultrie, Ga., where she saw first-hand the economic, societal and psychological impacts of destructive plant and animal diseases.

“I study molecular virology, but my goal is always to keep one foot in the furrow,” Whitfield says. “I grew up pulling weeds out of peanuts and helping my dad feed livestock, so I feel that I really understand the plight of farmers.”

“It was a diversified farm, but there was a lot of uncertainty, and that’s what inspired my career goal to develop technologies that increase food security and reduce harm to farmworkers and the environment. I understood how drought and diseases affect crop and animal production.”

 Tomato spotted wilt virus (TSWV) emerged as a significant problem when she was growing up on the farm in Georgia, and it’s now a focus of Whitfield’s lab. Additionally, when Whitfield was in her senior year of high school, a pseudorabies virus took out her father’s pig production, and he lost all of his animals.

“That was a really big deal, and you see how different diseases and stressors can totally destroy a crop and make it difficult,” she says.

Both of Whitfield’s parents are still actively engaged in managing the family farm and conversations with them continue to inform and inspire her research.

Viruses for good

Whitfield, a plant virologist from the Department of Entomology and Plant Pathology and a faculty member in the Chancellor’s Faculty Excellence Program in the Emerging Plant Disease and Global Food Security Cluster, recently won a Bayer Crop Science Grants4Ag award for her groundbreaking research using novel viral vectors for genome editing in maize (corn) and sorghum.

The project goal is to use this technology to create plants with traits that can be beneficial to farmers, consumers and the environment. The Grants4Ag program is unique because Bayer provides project funding without any “strings attached.” The scientist and the university retain the intellectual property.

“Generally, it’s considered bad to have a virus in your plants, but this project takes plant viruses and uses them for good,” she says. “Plant viruses are powerful tools for delivering molecules to their plant hosts, so we created an infectious clone of a plant rhabdovirus that can be engineered to carry beneficial proteins or RNA to plants with the goal of protecting them from stressors such as drought, disease and pests.”

Maize is a major crop in the U.S. and worldwide, and a robust and stable virus vector could cut years off the current maize improvement pipeline.

“The ability to modify a plant phenotype in a single crop cycle can greatly facilitate identification and deployment of beneficial traits to increase crop yields and plant resilience,” Whitfield says.

The virus-based gene expression technologies have been around for years, but Whitfield’s lab is using a different class of viruses that are more stable. The project was initially supported through the DARPA “Insect Allies” program that wrapped up in 2021, and this support enabled the creation of the first efficient negative-strand RNA virus vector for maize. These negative-strand RNA viruses are more complicated, but they are also more dependable and can “carry more cargo.”

“That means you can put more genetic information into them to express different genes in plants, and they keep their inserts for a longer amount of time,” she says.

One goal for this method targets drought stress in corn; other targets are emerging plant diseases and insect pests. The viral vector can be used to provide protection from insects that feed on plants and transmit diseases.

“Instead of applying pesticides, the novel virus system could deliver a protein or RNA that could target and kill pests, which can also be better for the environment and could reduce farmworker exposure to pesticides,” Whitfield explains.

The virus can also be used for genome editing of plants as a non-transgenic approach. The virus would deliver the materials to modify the DNA of the plant and the next generation of plants would be virus-free with an altered genome.

“I think of genomic-editing technology as green biotechnology. I believe there are innovative ways to protect the food we eat and do it in an environmentally friendly and sustainable way. My hope is that the development of beneficial viruses that edit plant genomes is one of those ways.”

Safer and faster

Growing up on a farm with well water, Whitfield remembers how her father needed a spot far enough from the well to mix pesticides so he wouldn’t risk contaminating the family’s drinking water. In some regions, she says, on top of water contamination, there is also the concern of off-target negative effects on animals. She argues that since genome-editing isn’t a chemical application like pesticide use, these types of safety concerns are greatly reduced. Instead of a piece
of farm equipment that depends on fuel, the plant does all the work.

“We think about steep gas prices any time agrochemicals are applied to farmland,” she says. “You’re using precious resources, and if you can plant a seed that’s able to protect itself, you’re saving so much money. If plants are protected from pests and drought, they will be more efficient and produce higher yields on less acreage, and therefore we can preserve land for native environments. These are the benefits I’m thinking about when I research ways to use virus vectors for crop protection.”

Another way this technology is helpful is that it’s fast.

“You normally have to go through the production of a transgenic plant, which takes a long time,” Whitfield says. “With the virus vector technology, you deliver the virus to the plant, and in a single season, you can test different traits. It allows people to test certain genes or traits that they want to modify quickly.”

Industry partners

Industry partners play an important role in moving research from the lab to the field, Whitfield says, and she is thrilled to be working with them and that they see potential in the technology.

“Collaborating with industry partners will be helpful as the technology is developed because it can be deployed at a larger scale,” she says. “They have many resources. I’m a smallish lab with two scientists working on this project, but they have an enormous infrastructure. Virus vector technology could be used for crop improvement very soon in the right hands.”

Additionally, Whitfield appreciates investments in time, money and energy to answer basic science questions. The pandemic is a good example, she says, because if people hadn’t studied coronaviruses years before COVID-19 emerged, we wouldn’t have accessed vaccines and antivirals so quickly.

“It’s so important to have a pipeline of scientists working on fundamental questions,” she says.

She points to her lab’s research with TSWV as another example: “The virus replicates and infects the plants, but it also infects the insect that transmits it, and this enables us to ask some really important basic questions about the ability to infect hosts in two different kingdoms. These viruses are related to human viruses, and understanding how the virus-transmitted viruses replicate in two different hosts informs virology in general.”

For the TSWV system, Whitfield and her colleague, Dorith Rotenberg, developed tomato plants that express small pieces of viral RNA that protect from virus infection.

A basic understanding of virus biology and evolution enables them to target functional domains of the virus proteins that are highly conserved between virus isolates and species. The resulting tomato plants are resistant to TSWV and related viruses.

This resistance strategy arrives at an opportune time because a new isolate of TSWV has emerged that overcomes the resistance gene most commonly used in tomatoes. Recent experiments showed that these new tomato plants are protected from the resistance-breaking TSWV strain.

Whitfield is quick to emphasize that research isn’t a solitary endeavor, and the lab’s success requires collaboration.

“It’s important to say that I work with a great team of scientists that I’m mentoring in my lab,” she says. “It’s the postdocs, graduate students and undergrads who are actively doing the research and addressing these big questions. They are vital to everything we’re talking about today, and mentoring and training the next generation of scientists is a really important part of what I do.”

Anna Whitfield’s experiments involve infecting plants with viruses that are carrying beneficial molecules. When the plants absorb the molecules from the virus, their DNA is modified to give them more resistance to insects that would otherwise feed on them.
TCMS celebrates National FFA Week

**Staff Reports**

THOMASVILLE, Ga. — The Thomas County Middle School FFA chapter celebrated National FFA Week, February 19-26, 2022. These members have a passion for agriculture, and Thomas County Middle FFA celebrated by participating in a chapter meeting, community service project, trivia challenges, Blue & Gold Day, and other activities. This National FFA Week embraces more than 735,000 members participating in a chapter meeting, community service project, trivia challenges, Blue & Gold Day, and other activities. This National FFA Week embraces more than 93 years of FFA traditions while looking forward to the organization’s future. More than 755,000 members participated in National FFA Week activities across the nation.

TCMS FFA students participate in more than 10 Career Development Events each year that focus on a variety of agricultural careers. Students spend weeks in preparation for these events by learning key information and demonstrating skills specific to each career. TCMS FFA had three state qualifying teams and individuals this year after each placed second on the area level. Lawson Whitfield competed in FFA Quiz, Leland Dees competed in Lawnmower Operations and Maintenance, and Taylor Butler, Pearson Dukes, Colton Nix, and Luke Roberson competed in Wildlife Management.

Designated a national week in 1947, the week of George Washington’s birthday, National FFA Week runs from Saturday to Saturday and gives FFA members an opportunity to educate the public about agriculture. During the week, chapters conduct a variety of activities to help others in their schools and communities learn about FFA and agriculture education.

As the top school-based youth leadership development organization in the nation, FFA helps young people meet new agricultural challenges by developing their unique talents and exploring their interests in a broad range of career pathways. The FFA mission is to make a positive difference in the lives of students by developing their potential for premier leadership, personal growth, and career success through agricultural education.
THE A-BEE-C’S OF POLLINATION

Thomas County students at Garrison-Pilcher Elementary School are learning “The A Bee C’s of Pollination” in Jessica Duncan’s science specials rotation. Duncan received a $1,000 grant from Middle South Georgia Soil and Water Conservation District to implement the program that features two bee hives. Students will help Duncan tend to the bees safely as the grant funded three youth suits and two adult jackets. Duncan also acquired a screened-in tent which a class of students will fit in and be able to observe without the risk of getting stung. Tony Hogg at Full Moon Farm Store in Monticello, Florida, has been a huge help with getting the program started. Wee Bees Ariyana Powell, Leland White, and Emree Reneau are pictured with Duncan wearing bee-keeping safety gear.

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Governor Kemp signs Freedom to Farm Act

By Dave Williams
Capitol Beat News Service

ATLANTA — Gov. Brian Kemp traveled to the South Georgia Farm Belt Wednesday to sign three agricultural bills, including legislation making it harder to file nuisance lawsuits against farmers.

The General Assembly passed the Freedom to Farm Act earlier this month, mostly along party lines, after minority Democrats argued it offers less protection to farmers than the current state law governing nuisance suits.

The bill gives neighbors bothered by bad smells, dust or noise emanating from a nearby farm two years to file a nuisance suit. Once that statute of limitations expired, any farm operating legally will be protected.

Kemp said protecting farming is more important than ever with war raging in Ukraine, Europe’s breadbasket. “This legislation increases and clearly defines protection for both farmers and property owners while still addressing bad actors,” the governor said during a ceremony at the farm of House Agriculture Committee Chairman Robert Dickey, R-Musella, the bill’s chief sponsor.

The measure’s opponents said a law passed during the 1980s protects existing farmers indefinitely from nuisances that occur after a new farm begins operating nearby.
Avian flu flare-ups in other states ruffle feathers in Ga.

By Ross Williams
Georgia Recorder

ATLANTA — Spring may be a good time to catch a glimpse of various duck species in Georgia or on their way north, but some farmers and public health officials are watching those flocks with suspicion rather than wonder.

Ducks are a major carrier of the highly pathogenic avian influenza, and eight waterfowl representing three duck species have been identified as carriers across Glynn, Camden and Hart counties since February, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Ducks usually do not get sick from the virus, but they can spread it to domesticated birds like chickens and turkeys, among whom it can be deadly. That threat has state officials on high alert in Georgia, which is one of the nation’s top broiler producers.

As of the writing of this article in mid-April, no cases of avian influenza had been found in commercial or domestic flocks in Georgia, but it has been a major problem in other states this year. Avian influenza, or bird flu, has been detected in commercial flocks in 26 states.

Georgia’s Department of Agriculture has been planning for a bad avian flu season since the last major outbreak in 2015 that saw more than 50 million birds culled.

Members of the industry, department workers and scientists have been cooperating to keep the virus out, said Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture Gary Black.

“We do regular tabletop exercises at the department with our team, regular maintenance on equipment, regular walk-throughs, and certainly since the advent of the disease this season, we’ve been on the most brilliant red alert you can imagine with our animal teams, working in concert with our Georgia poultry diagnostic laboratories.”

Since February, the state has suspended all poultry exhibitions, shows, sales, swaps and meets in an attempt to keep the state’s birds in pandemic bubbles.

“We hope that’s just temporarily, we’ve done it before. I think we did it back in 2017,” said Bo Warren, chief communications officer for the state Department of Agriculture.

“What we’re trying to accomplish there is just to keep birds from different farms congregating together, whether that’s at a swap meet, bird show, flea market, or even a livestock barn. You can still buy and sell poultry, birds direct to each other, but we’re trying to prevent the public congregation of birds.”

Black said he’s confident in the plan his department has hatched.

“We’re the No. 1 poultry producing state in the nation, and so my commitment in doing this job has been that we would be the No. 1 best prepared,” he said.

There’s no need for chicken consumers to worry about their next wing or thigh, Black said.

“Georgians need to know, and this is important even with our trading partners around the globe, every flock of chickens, before it goes to market, is tested,” he said. “And so it’s not like we just suddenly find this. It’s an every day vigilance with our laboratory network, and not just with (highly pathogenic avian influenza), but it’s also a host of other diseases.”

A lot of money could be at stake in preventing the spread in Georgia. Poultry makes up $28 billion of the state’s $75 billion agriculture industry, and top importers of U.S. poultry have restricted imports based on the birds’ state of origin.

Mexico and China have restricted trade by state, while Canada has limited its restrictions to areas that extend about six miles from infected sites.

Public health officials say another reason to prevent the spread is to lower the chances of the virus mutating to become dangerous to people. They warn that avian influenza viruses can spread from human to bird to human from exposure to infected livestock, though the risk of this happening is low, as is the risk of the virus developing a capability to effectively spread from human to human.

The Georgia Department of Public Health is monitoring the situation to make sure that what’s been happening with birds across the country this year does not happen with people, said state epidemiologist Dr. Cherie Drenzek at a board of public health meeting April 12.

“If indeed we see this transfer to people, it doesn’t belong there in the first place, it could change and evolve,” she said. “We want to be able to monitor that. We’ve had a lot of experience with other new viruses that have crossed the line into people. In China, since 2003, there have been outbreaks of avian influenza in people as well, of varying types over the years. And over the last few years here in the U.S., we’ve even seen swine flu viruses cross into and infect people at some agricultural fairs, primarily in the Midwest. So it can happen, but it’s never resulted in this sustained transmission or change, where we’ve gotten a brand new virus, but that’s what we keep an eye on.”

Drenzek said that involves keeping track of people who work with birds who become ill.

“Our role is really to be able to identify individuals that may have been exposed to these birds, either working directly with them or depopulating them if needed, and usually, they’re under protection, and PPE is appropriate, but we want to be able to monitor them for the development of any flu-like illness and facilitate testing.”

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Bobby has been a Georgia Licensed REALTOR® for 28+ years. He is a Registered Forester with 50+ years experience in the timber industry. He specializes in Land Sales and all types of Land Management; including timber appraisals, timber inventory & sales as well as controlled burning, land clearing, road & pond building and repair, site preparation, heavy mulching, tree planting, GIS mapping, etc.

He is a former member of the Thomas County Board of Commissioners, the Thomasville/Thomas Co. Humane Society Board, and the Thomasville/Thomas Co. Recreation Board. He is a member of the Thomasville Area Board of REALTORS®, Georgia Association of REALTORS®, National Association of REALTORS®, Georgia Forestry Association, Thomasville/Thomas County Chamber of Commerce, Tall Timbers, National Deer Association and the Forest Landowners Association.
Flavor of Georgia grand prize goes to Hart Dairy

By Jordan Powers
University of Georgia

ATHENS, Ga. — Hart Dairy won the grand prize at the 2022 Flavor of Georgia food contest for their Pasture Raised & Grass Fed 365 Days Per Year Chocolate Whole Milk.

Hart Dairy is an ethically driven dairy company based in Waynesboro, Georgia, led by Tim Connell and Richard Watson. Their cows are pasture raised, never confined and grass fed 365 days a year. The agribusiness promotes its chocolate milk not only as a treat for the whole family but as a beneficial post-workout drink due to the milk’s protein and carbohydrate content.

Hart Dairy promises milk that is better nutritionally, better for the environment and better for the animals.

THE 2022 WINNERS

This year’s winners are listed by company, product name and city within the 11 competition categories. All entries are from Georgia-based businesses.

- Barbecue Sauces: Brooksmade Gourmet Foods Inc., Habanero Soulful Sauce, Alpharetta
- Beverages: Byne Blueberry Farms, Blueberry Cider, Waynesboro
- Condiments and Salsas: Pride Road LLC, Peach Hibiscus Chutney, Lithonia
- Confections: Maybird Confections, White Gold Pecan Toffee, Alpharetta
- Dairy and Related Products: Hart Dairy, Pasture Raised & Grass Fed 365 Days Per Year Chocolate Whole Milk, Alpharetta
- Honey and Related Products: Savannah Bee Company, Hot Honey, Savannah
- Jams and Jellies: We Bee Jammin’ LLC, Strawberry Lemonade Marmalade, Pooler
- Meats and Seafood: White Oak Pastures, Pastured Pork Bacon, Bluffton
- Miscellaneous: Sutton Mill Creek Syrup Co., Spiced Apple Cider Hickory Syrup, Clarkesville
- Sauces and Seasonings: Komodo Sauces, Komodo Black, Kennesaw
- Snack Foods: Mokipops LLC, Mokipops Basil Lemonade Frozen Fruit Bar Popsicle, Atlanta

A People’s Choice Award, chosen by event attendees, went to HIBO LLC for their HIBO Classic Hibiscus Superdrink +Peach.

While some of this year’s winners were new to the Flavor of Georgia, others have a long track record of success at the competition.

White Oak Pastures won the Honey and Related Products category and was a finalist in Jams and Jellies as well as Snack Foods in 2020. The company was also a finalist in Meats and Seafood in 2015, 2016 and 2018 and won for both the Meats category and the grand prize in 2008.

Sutton Mill Creek Syrup Co was a finalist in the Miscellaneous category in 2020. Byne Blueberry Farms won Barbecue Sauces in 2019. They also won for Confections in 2012, Snack Foods in 2013 and Beverages in 2014.

Pride Road was a finalist in Jams and Jellies in 2018. Savannah Bee Company won Barbecue and Hot Sauces in 2012. They also won Natural and Organic Products in 2007 and 2008 and the grand prize in 2010.
Innovation Lab uses power of peanuts to fight hunger

By Allison Floyd
University of Georgia

ATHENS, Ga. — In the poorest part of Senegal in West Africa, 60% of households grow at least some peanuts, even as climate change creates hotter, drier weather that makes it harder to bring in a crop.

Across the continent, in Uganda, families give peanut seeds as a wedding present to help the couple get a good start, although farms there are hit hard by a fungal disease that can destroy a peanut crop.

These farms are tiny compared to U.S. operations — only an acre or two each — but they are key to feeding the world’s growing population, keeping children healthy with nutritious food and lifting millions of people out of poverty.

The University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences is helping them do it through a partnership with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The Peanut Innovation Lab — technically, the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Peanut — is a five-year, $14 million program funded through an agreement between USAID and UGA.

“Peanut is an amazing plant that provides health benefits to consumers, agronomic benefits to the farm and economic benefits to producers,” said Dave Hoisington, director of the Peanut Innovation Lab. “Tapping into those benefits to improve food security is important, and UGA’s College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences has spearheaded that work for years.”

The program isn’t a brick and mortar lab, but a portfolio of projects led by researchers across the U.S. and Africa to alleviate hunger by helping farmers in developing countries to grow more peanuts.

Since Georgia is the leader in peanut production in the U.S. — about half the domestic crop is grown in the state — it makes sense that one-quarter of the innovation lab scientists are at UGA. The others are at universities across the U.S. — including North Carolina State University, University of Florida, Virginia Tech, Washington University (in St. Louis), Texas Tech, UC Santa Barbara and Alcorn State — and in Africa.

It also makes sense that many of the scientists would be experts in peanut agronomy, but solving complex problems of food security requires experts of all kinds: entomologists, geneticists, food scientists, economists and sociologists.

For the past four years, Peanut Innovation Lab scientists have been working on 27 projects that dive into the plant’s genes to create resilient varieties, uncover how consuming peanuts may help kids do better in school, address the challenges of women and young farmers to make them more successful and more.
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