Gary Morrell, the 2007 Small Farmer of the Year, has a new love. He still has time for the Pink Lady, the Jonagold, and the Fuji, but these days he is totally smitten by a sweet round thing called the Honeycrisp. Yes, they’re apples and they’re intensely loved by the Alexander County farmer, whose orchards are also filled with nectarines, Asian pears, white peaches and Chinese chestnut trees.

Morrell, you see, doesn’t just love fruit, he grows it. “I could never get enough good fruit and I decided the only way to get good fruit is to grow it yourself,” he says.

That passion indicates just how far Morrell will go to ensure his customers get the best fruit experience he can give them. It’s a standard that also figures strongly into his ascension this year as the Gilmer L. and Clara Y. Dudley Small Farmer of the Year. He received the award last month from The Cooperative Extension Program at A&T.

Working with Extension, Morrell, 55, has held demonstrations and research projects at his orchards, and has also experimented with rootstocks recommended by Extension. He reduces his pesticide use by 40 percent by spraying alternate rows of trees and using dwarf rootstocks. “In a little over 20 years, Gary has transitioned from a farm laborer to one of the most successful growers in Alexander County,” says William Hanlin, agricultural Extension agent for Alexander and Wilkes counties. “Gary’s constant research and experimentation with new varieties has led him to be a leader in this area.”

Gary Morrell’s Greengo Orchards have a varied production mix and award-winning care.

Morrell grew up on a dairy farm in Michigan and the reason he fulfilled his dreams in North Carolina rather than in his home state are summed up by two quick reasons. “Number one, I don’t like snow,” Morrell says, laughing, “and number two, I don’t like milking cows.”

As a young man, Morrell left the snowy, cold climes of Michigan and struck out in search of adventure and work. From the Southeast groves of muggy south Florida, Morrell worked his way across country to the arid Northwest of central Washington — the nation’s top producer of apples.

By 1981, when he landed in the Alexander County foothills, Morrell knew North Carolina was where he was meant to settle. Taylorsville is known as the “Apple City” and its reputation and opportunities quickly filled Morrell’s eye. By 1984, he had bought his own land but instead of apples, he planted four acres of nectarines. He has continued to diversify his fruit offerings over the years, adding a high-density Fuji apple orchard, persimmon trees, white peaches and — to tap into the region’s growing Asian population — Morrell also began growing Asian pears. In all, he has more than 15 acres of fruit trees and is negotiating to increase his Greengo Orchards by several more acres.

Most notably, Morrell has become a retailer, selling to a growing customer base willing during peak season to wait more than an hour for a bushel or more of his fruit. His business has been cultivated on word-of-mouth endorsements, and customers drive from as far away as southern Alabama each summer for his fruit.

Although Morrell doesn’t believe one bad apple will spoil the whole bunch, he does believe a rotten one would hurt his business. That standard is why Morrell doesn’t allow customers to pick their own fruit. “I’ve had people wander around and pick an armful of stuff and I have taken it away from them because it’s not good,” Morrell says. “If I wouldn’t give it to my mother, I won’t sell it to a customer. Anything coming out of here has my name on it.”

inside

• First-ever biotech spinoff for A&T comes from SAES research
• Small Farms Week 2007—a milestone event in many ways
Biotech startup rises from research in SAES labs

Dr. John Allen

A discovery made in the SAES laboratories has given rise to N.C. A&T's first spin-off company. Provagen, as the company is called, will produce and market a protein that can be used in medical research or in manufacturing treatments and diagnostic tests for disease.

“We are very pleased that something we have been working on for so long might have a useful application in what has become the multimillion dollar market for antibody binding proteins,” said Dr. John Allen, whose discovery of the bacterial protein named “Protein V” paved the way for the company. He has identified and sequenced the gene for the protein, and cloned it into a harmless bacterium so it can be used safely in research or in manufacturing processes.

“Creating commercial ventures out of research is important because it ensures that our research makes it out of the laboratory and into the marketplace, where it can benefit consumers and society,” said Dr. Alton Thompson, dean of the School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences. “That’s what a land-grant university is all about. We are in the business of finding solutions and then getting the information to the people who need it.”

Protein V is one of just three antibody-binding proteins that are used to extract important antibodies found in the immune systems of humans and other mammals. Antibodies are the chemical triggers that spark the body’s natural resistance to disease. In their purified form, they are used in medical research, and in the growing branch of medicine known as immunotherapy, which treats disease by stimulating the immune system. Protein V is believed to be superior to other antibody-binding proteins now on the market because it can extract a broader range of antibodies from humans and other mammals.

The University’s Office of Outreach and Technology Transfer has secured one patent and six additional patent applications for processes using the protein, and has been instrumental in establishing Provagen as a corporation. An interim CEO has been hired, and the next steps will be to seek small business funding, and continue with market development and strategic planning. Other groups assisting in the startup include the North Carolina Biotechnology Center, the N.C. Small Business and Technology Development Center, and the HiTec Program at N.C. State.

“Protein V is a product of our SAES lab. It is one of the first products to come from the lab and it has created a spin-off company,” said Dr. Chung W. Seo, who came to A&T in 1969 and in 1973 he was appointed chair of the food science committee that went on to establish the SAES food and nutritional sciences program. In 2000, he was selected Teacher of the Year for the SAES. His research specialties have included investigations of new sanitizing methods for green leafy vegetables, and the potential use of peanut hulls and other agri-cultural by-products in municipal water purification systems. He also has conducted research into the Omega-3 fatty acids found in fish, which are being used in heart disease prevention.

In addition to a long list of publications in technical bulletins and poster presentations at scientific conferences, Seo’s curriculum vitae also includes service as a technical reviewer for both scientific journals and funding agencies. Seo twice served as interim director for the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences.

Dr. Chung Seo and one of his graduate students, Tameka Droughton Web, and Olga Mutamba, a research assistant.

Preparation, finding, implementing solutions.

Dr. Daniel Lyons Sr. presenting Gary Morrell of Taylorsville the G. L. and Clara Y. Dudley Small Farmer of the Year Award as Elsie Dudley Little looked on.

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Dr. Chung Seo and one of his graduate students, Tameka Droughton Web, and Olga Mutamba, a research assistant.
One of the School of Agriculture and Environmental Science’s longtime friends and supporters, Eva Clayton, was the keynote speaker at the 2007 Small Farmers Appreciation Luncheon. Clayton was the first African-American woman to be elected to Congress from North Carolina.

A member of the House Ag. Committee, Clayton was a frequent champion of funding support for rural North Carolina and the entire network of 1890 land-grants. Following five terms in Congress, Clayton has gone on to serve as Associate Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.