

As it turns out, the Dashers found themselves on the hot seat because they ran one of the first Glennville growing operations to sell their onions through area Piggly Wiggly grocery stores. This was the early 1970s, well before the Vidalia went national and the grocery store chain reportedly sold more of the onions than any other single source. Nothing controversial there, until you consider that the store's distributorship was located in, you guessed it, Vidalia.

Since the 1940s, Vidalia had been the home of the first state farmers' market to showcase the onion, and now with the Pig's warehouse located there, too, they put their claim to the onion in writing.

"Vidalia sweet onions grown and packed for Piggly Wiggly Southern, Vidalia, Georgia," says Robert, reciting the label printed on the Pig's bag that held the onion. "Now, they were the same onions that had been grown for 40 years right here in my hometown, but they decided to start marketing them through Vidalia.

"Well, I thought they were going to run us out of town here in Glennville," says Robert, of his neighbors' reaction to the brothers working with what amounted to the other team. "We had people say to us, 'You're traitors. You don't even care about your town.'"

These days, however, his neighbors are more inclined to say, "thanks" for his and Gerald's efforts on behalf of their local agricultural jewel. Over the years, the brothers pounded pavement and office doors across the country promoting the Vidalia. The Dashers were early adopters of controlled-atmosphere storage that gave the Vidalia a longer shelf life. They also developed a new, coated cardboard box for shipping that helped give the onion a greater geographical range.

Perhaps their biggest marketing coup was brokering a deal to sell onions to Kroger grocery stores. "That's what really started to take the onion national," says Robert. "The volume was huge and required onions from lots of growers down here."

Because of the efforts of Robert, Gerald and other local farmers, the Vidalia is now one of North America's most recognizable agricultural products. It brings in an annual farm gate value of \$140 million and is protected by a Federal Marketing Order that provides marketing and research funding.

It was for his work on behalf of the Vidalia, as well as his help in building G&R Farms into an innovative, diversified farming operation that Robert was named the 2010 Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year. In giving him the annual award,



## Farmer of the Year

### NAMED THE 2010 SWISHER SWEETS/SUNBELT AG EXPO

**SOUTHEASTERN FARMER OF THE YEAR**, Robert Dasher received the use of a Massey Ferguson® tractor. Red tractors are, however, nothing new to the Glennville, Ga., farmer. Among a few newer models, he still owns two MF135 tractors that he purchased in the early 1970s.

"That 135 is the most balanced tractor," says Robert. "It turns around on a dime. I use one in my onion planting beds, where it costs about \$6,000 an acre in seed cost, so you have to do precision work. The 135 just handles so well, and you can see off it so well, too.

"I wouldn't give mine up for anything. I can't part with them," he says.

Robert asked that his new Massey Ferguson tractor be an 8650, which he expects to receive in time for fall planting and will get to use for a year. "I need that horsepower now and the size to work not just the onions, but our other crops. I know these big Masseys are real good on fuel efficiency," he says. "I already know they're a quality brand."

