



*Kathi (left), James and Bethani Cooley work together to make their farm-related businesses successful, including their Chesnee market (right), which sells their fresh produce (far right). "My mom and dad taught me to do whatever you could to get it done," James says.*



fresh market," James says. Nowadays, "I do all my packing by hand. It's worked out good for us."

That's an understatement. Strawberry Hill USA is recognized as the largest strawberry producer in the state. "We don't compare [to states such as Florida]," James says. "They can grow nice big strawberries for three and four months. We [have] a six-week, hopefully eight-week [growing] period. But it works."

He started with 6 acres and now has 120. "One hundred acres of strawberries is equal to more than 1,000 acres of peaches [in terms of] work and the hands needed," he says. Plus, he adds, "It's over \$5,000 an acre just to put them in."

Recently, the farm began growing fall strawberries in tunnel greenhouses. The plants are grown the same, except they get covered when it's cold. In South Carolina, the cold weather can be interspersed with warm, sunny days well into winter, making the tunnels a terrific option for extending the growing season. "These fall strawberries, we pick almost to Christmastime," James says.

### Adapting to Change

"Whatever it takes to make it work, that's what we've got to do," he says of farming. "It changes daily." For instance, he recently landed a contract to grow peaches for Peterson Farms, the largest privately owned fruit processor in Michigan, who packages peach slices and cubes for McDonald's and Wendy's.

"I'm not set in my ways," he says. "I can change. You got to do as the road leads you."

That adaptive attitude helped James win the

Swisher Sweets/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year for 2013. Among the prizes was a \$15,000 cash award for the top title, plus \$2,500 as a state winner from Swisher International and use for a year of a Massey Ferguson® tractor.

"I'd get those checks out and I'd rub them in my hand," he says. "[I'd think], 'I'm going to get me a truck. No, I don't think so.' And I'd put them back." The winning checks sat for so long, they had to be reissued.

Finally, James decided. "I felt like we need to put back into the community," he says. "So we're going to do a scholarship with the money."

### Surviving and Thriving

"Look here," James says to a question about a life-threatening accident he had, "I don't want a pity party."

There's little chance anyone meeting James would ever feel pity. A whirlwind of motion, this stellar, storytelling farmer with a ready smile draws people in. He deals daily with major physical limitations without complaint, making his story that much more inspirational.

Two Cooley family members almost lost their lives on Oct. 13, 2002. James and daughter Brooke were riding on a new motorcycle, when he failed to make a curve and ran into a truck.

"I went into the curve. It was my fault. I would love to say a bee stung me. I would love to say that—but I can't say that."

Both were airlifted to an Asheville, N.C., hospital.