



How three generations turned ag diversity into Peanut Efficiency Award

Three generations now work Babb Farms in eastern Virginia, diversifying across seven companies and leaning on the newest generation for technological innovation.

The men start to gather just inside one of the equipment sheds on a cool morning in Windsor, Va., at the height of planting. Dad, Jimmy Babb, is there first with son Les. Bryan, Jimmy's other son, is soon standing by his brother. Cousins Jamie and Brendan arrive a little later, after starting the day servicing equipment and loading seed.

The three generations of Babbs — the third, fourth and fifth — then file into the office at the back of the building. Les sits briefly at the head of the 1950s dinette but then pops up and moves to a chair along the side; Dad's here today, and he still sits at the head of the table, especially this one with the worn white area on one corner of the gray Formica top. That's where the tea pitcher sat when this was the dinner table of Les and Bryan's childhood.

For the 2026 Farm Press Peanut Efficiency Award winners for the Upper Southeast, this table is a place for both laughter and hard conversations. Today is for looking back and appreciating how far they've come.

These three generations are the second half of Babb Farms' history, and Jimmy still remembers breaking the ground and cultivating peanuts, chopping and stacking them on the shocks to dry. They used a stationary picker to pull the dried peanuts off the vines in January. The Babbs had perhaps 30 to 50 acres of peanuts in those heavy labor days of peanut farming.

Since Jimmy's early days on the farm, and especially since Bryan and Les returned to it, the Babbs have moved in and out of the peanut industry, focused on the business side and have been willing to shift as markets demanded. They sought diversity before it had a name in farming.

The first steps when the farm went from one family to three was to add acres.

"We had to," Les said. "And as we picked up land, we picked up quota."

Growing quota:

That's when folks bought and sold peanuts under the federal government's quota program. Without quota, it didn't pay to grow them. In 2002, that program ended, and the federal Commodity Credit Corporation bought out the farmers holding quota. Since peanuts were no longer part of the program, the Babbs walked away from the crop as it didn't pay to grow them anymore. That year, the program set the price for quota on Virginia cultivars at \$610 a short ton, while non-quota peanuts ran about \$200 under that.

In the first years after the buyout, prices tended to run somewhere in that range, generally closer to the bottom number. "They bought us out, so we increased cotton," Bryan recalled. Eventually, the family sold all their peanut equipment, including the diggers and the combines. When the program ended, the Babbs were up to 68 peanut trailers.

Expanding peanut acreage:

Ten years later, they came back to peanuts with a four-row combine and 100 acres. Brendan said the family was trying to diversify. It was a good year to make that move. The weather played better for peanuts than cotton. They decided to make the move after buying an onboard module builder, commonly called a round bale cotton picker, thus reducing labor needs at harvest. Peanuts in 2011 performed like it was a tryout. "We went 5,000 pounds (per acre) at least," Bryan said. For three years, they used one planter, one digger and one combine, slowly increasing peanut acreage each year.

For this season, the Babbs have 1,015 acres, all Virginia varieties. About two-thirds are Emory, and the rest are Bailey II. On the crop diversity side, they also continue to grow corn and cotton, largely PhytoGen varieties. They double-crop soybeans and wheat, and use cover crops. They also manage a cow-calf herd, which will about double in size this year when they finalize buying out a nearby herd from brothers who are retiring.

In addition to diversity, the Babbs seek premium payments across their crops. In peanuts, that means growing certified seed peanuts for Birdsong. In soybeans, they grow edibles, a crop they added in the mid-2000s. Of course, growing for a premium also adds management intensity — diligent weed control, no skimping on nutrient inputs and intense scouting. Attention to detail is essential because those who buy certified seed are very particular in their quality expectations. If the peanuts don't meet those standards, Jamie said, "they can refuse them."

The Babbs agree that technology helps both to keep track of what is needed where and to reduce the cost of inputs. For that, the business leaders turn to the newest generation. They also all agree that Jamie and Brendan's college degrees from Virginia Tech University and North Carolina State University, respectively, were good investments. "We do a good job of staying with what works," Brendan said. "But we also try something new every year." For instance, they use John Deere RowCommand with Section Control and ExactApply on their planters and sprayers. "When I say I put 140 pounds to the acre, I put 140 pounds to the acre," Bryan said, noting the savings that that offers at planting.

Diversity extends beyond crops:

Beyond the field, the Babbs continue diversifying their ag business. Now with seven companies, counting Les' white gold English cream golden retrievers breeding venture, the Babbs are slowly moving toward including all three generations in the businesses. The goal is stable profit opportunity. "I made \$150 a week, and sometimes, those weeks were 125 hours. We don't want them to struggle like we did," Les said, referring to the farm's future generations. Then, with a laugh, he said, "I still want them to work their butts off."

Jamie and Brendan are adding to the business ventures, the next of which will likely be a cattle-finishing operation. Two years ago, Brendan also added Shiloh Cotton Company, an apparel company that uses cotton grown on Babb Farms. The company motto is "From Virginia Dirt to Your Shirt." "It's spun in North Carolina and cut, sewn and dyed in Georgia," he explained, rounding out the rest of their cotton's journey. With their plates full, the question becomes how the elder two generations might retire. Jamie, however, is the first to answer. "I can promise y'all I'm retiring," he said.

Les and Bryan are shocked that anybody might even ask such a thing. Neither can see full retirement in their future, though both have the itch to travel more often. "Our succession plan is one of us slows down and the other one picks up the slack," Bryan said. That's kind of where it is with Jimmy, too. The elder statesman on this multigenerational farm still shows up most days, mostly to watch and wonder at the next two generations of Babbs. Seeing them build up and carry on the family business, Jimmy said, "is great." The Babbs and the other recipients will be recognized July 23 at the Farm Press Peanut Efficiency Awards Breakfast in Panama City Beach, Fla., in conjunction with the Southern Peanut Growers Conference.

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