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US Business Review

April 1, 2006

Giant growth: **Southern Valley** Fruit and Vegetable joined Green Giant in 2005. The company's recent focus on quality and year-round supply made it an attractive partner; Company overview

BYLINE: Srinivasan, Kirsten

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EVER SINCE **SOUTHERN VALLEY** FRUIT AND Vegetable added a farm in Mexico to its operations in 2003, it has grown on a "giant" scale. The Georgia-based company has become a national player, shipping about 200,000 tons of product annually. It was invited into the Green Giant label in January 2005.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Southern Valley, founded in 1987, grows cabbage, squash, cucumber, eggplant and other vegetables in Georgia. It is an exclusive U.S. packer for the Green Giant label for 48 states. "Green Giant has what they call the Green Giant family of partners," explains Jon **Schwalls**, director of operations. "There is a potato packer, lettuce packer, etc., and only one of each with lot of different fresh products. There are 15 partners now in the Green Giant family that have products so the Green Giant label is marketed as a whole product line, but we each individually operate, control and sell our own product with that label."

Green Giant partners pack only in their respective labels or the Green Giant label. Other Green Giant partners include WM Bolthouse Farms Inc., Colorful Harvest LLC, Curran Co., Growers Express LLC, C.M. Holtzinger Fruit Co., King Fresh Produce LLC, Modern Mushroom Farms Inc., Pearson Foods Corp., Potandon Produce LLC, Taylor Farms Inc. and Wayne E. Bailey Produce Co. Scholl Group is the marketing arm of the Green Giant Fresh label. Americus Bean Co., Custom Pak Inc. and Roberson Farms are sublicensed by partners to pack in the Green Giant label.

In addition to Green Giant, **Southern Valley** also offers its own **Southern Valley** label. **Schwalls** admits it is a challenge to brand a produce product like a cucumber. Without packaging, consumers have trouble identifying where the product is coming from, he explains.

"Consumer demand is constantly evolving," **Schwalls** adds. "Anything that is new is old tomorrow, and that's the big challenge in the marketplace because a lot of times the industry seems to focus on the new thing, the latest and greatest this or that, packaging and display and presentation. Where we've differed is that we tend to want to focus inside the box."

"That's something we talk about a lot around here. You hear the old adage, let's look outside. We say let's remember to stay focused on the inside. In the end, it's not the packaging. All those things are great and trendy, but the bottom line is it's all about the product quality and integrity. That's our focus; whether it's appearance, shelf life or product being [produced] safely--we have consumer trust in our products."

Service and quality are strong points for the company, **Schwalls** says. The company's farm in Mexico means it can produce a year-round supply of products without outsourcing from somewhere else. This makes for greater consistency rather than "one day getting this kind of product and the next day a different type," he explains. "Because we are doing all the farming in two locations, we are giving customers a consistently packed product, similar appearance and not such a strong change at [different] times of the year."

Varieties, colors and quality can change drastically with each season, he notes, but **Southern Valley** has greatly reduced this variation by controlling the supply chain.

"That's one of our strongest points of service--being able to give our customers a consistent, quality product and offer a wider array of product," he says. "We are the farmer, packer and seller. We are carrying that chain all the way through internally."

The company's presence in Mexico also makes it easy to source small quantities of other types of produce. For customers, "it's a logistic nightmare getting a small quantity of quality product" from Mexico, **Schwalls** notes, but **Southern Valley** can easily ship small quantities of these highly perishable items with its other products.

Southern Valley has greatly improved its cucumbers in recent years with its switch to growing on poles and nets. "We converted all our acreage to that in the end of 2004, and we see a big trend not just from our side but the consumer side and retail side of people wanting pole-grown cucumbers because of their appearance and quality," he says. "[We are] putting a lot of focus and attention, and resources to develop that."

"What sets us apart is the consistency of product we have, especially in cucumbers," he adds. "That has brought us a lot of business. As far as we know, nobody else in the United States is growing a complete [year-round] pole-grown supply of cucumbers."

Being a year-round supplier has also helped **Southern Valley** maintain closer relationships with customers, he says.

Despite its national success, he says the company will not forget its roots. "We are a family owned and operated company with a long farming heritage," he says. "What got us where we are is our honesty and morality, commitment to excellence in products and having an enterprising spirit, but one of the bottom lines of all that is the family company we've set up. It's our people that build our company and we will continue to see our company grow and prosper in the future."

RELATED ARTICLE: PROFILE

Southern Valley Fruit and Vegetable

www.southernvalley.us

HQ: Norman Park, Ga.

Employees: 1,700

Product: Produce

Jon **Schwalls**: "We are a family owned and operated company with a long farming heritage."

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