

2003
Woman of the Year
in Agriculture



Jennie Lee Zipperer

Dear Friends of Agriculture:

The “Woman of the Year in Agriculture” award ceremony is always a much-anticipated event, adding to the excitement of opening-day festivities at the Florida State Fair. The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services has been proud to sponsor this prestigious award in conjunction with the Florida State Fair Authority since 1985.



It is my pleasure to present the “Woman of the Year in Agriculture” award for 2003 to Jennie Lee Zipperer of Fort Myers.

Jennie Lee Zipperer has made significant contributions to Florida’s horticulture and cattle industries. She developed several varieties of hybrid gladiola, and established one of the country’s preeminent purebred Beefmaster herds. She served as director, secretary, treasurer, vice president and president of the Southeastern Beefmaster Breeders Association. Under her leadership, sales topped \$1.6 million at the Southeastern Sales Auction, a first for the Beefmaster industry. She also served on the board of directors and as vice president of the Central States Beefmaster Breeders Association. She served on the board of directors of Beefmasters Breeders United (BBU) and as its vice president, and in 1992 was elected the first woman president in the organization’s 40-year history. She was named the Southeastern Beefmaster Breeders Association’s Member of the Year for 1991 and the BBU Breeder of the Year in 1995.

As the most recent inductee into this exclusive group, Jennie Lee Zipperer joins 19 other women who have earned the respect and admiration of their peers by making outstanding contributions to Florida agriculture.

Again, it is my great pleasure and honor to congratulate Jennie Lee Zipperer for being named “Woman of the Year in Agriculture” for 2003.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Charles H. Bronson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Charles H. Bronson
Commissioner of Agriculture



Jennie Lee Zipperer

An outstanding representative of Florida agriculture, Jennie Lee Zipperer has made significant contributions in both the horticulture and cattle industry. As a horticulturist, she developed several varieties of hybrid gladiola that helped build Zipperer Farms into one of the foremost producers of that flower. As a cattle breeder, she established one of the preeminent purebred Beefmaster herds in the nation and has been active in promoting the Florida cattle industry around the world.

Jennie Lee was born in Fort Myers, the daughter of Howard Wheeler, a prominent building contractor in the 1920s and 1930s who was the original developer of Edison Park and the founder of Wheeler Brothers Construction Company. Jennie Lee married into Florida agriculture in 1953 when she became the wife of John O. Zipperer Jr., then a student in the College of Agriculture at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

Zipperer's father, John Sr., had come to Sebring in 1929 and established a fernery to ship floral ferns to northern florists. He entered the gladiolus business in 1932 and moved it to Fort Myers in 1938. In 1944 the business became Zipperer Farms, as it is known today.





Over the years, the established varieties of gladiolus began to weaken and were unable to maintain the sizes and standards required by Zipperer Farms. A search of the country showed that superior varieties were nowhere to be found, so Jennie Lee became involved in the development of the farm's own gladiolus varieties. She embarked on an intense program of cross-breeding commercially successful varieties with unrelated varieties that had certain desirable traits. Through careful selection and record keeping, the strongest and most disease-resistant varieties were created. This yielded varieties that were suitable for winter cut flower production in South Florida.

“It took two years to get to the point where we could walk down the rows and judge whether a flower had good-colored florets, evenly placed on a tall, straight spike,” Jennie Lee said. “We might go through half a million flowers before we got to one that might work. Then it would take six to eight more years of testing before a seedling could be deemed commercially viable.”

Gladiolus fields lay fallow for three years before replanting, and to make use of the land the family decided to plant pastures and raise cattle.

“I always tell the story that there are only so many creative ways you can clean a bathtub,” she said. “So while I was working on the house I would plan what I wanted to do with my cattle.”



In 1960, Jennie Lee purchased a small herd of cross-bred Florida cattle and accomplished the considerable achievement of bringing the herd's conception rate up to 95 percent. In the early 1970s, Zipperer Farms bought a group of Black Baldie cows and achieved significant improvements in the weights of their calves by breeding them with Beefmaster bulls. Those results were so promising that she entered into a business separate from Zipperer Farms' commercial cattle raising. Zipperer Beefmasters was born.

The requirements of cattle breeding differ from those of cattle ranching, and Jennie Lee made use of her experience breeding chinchillas, quarter horses, and flowers, as well as the training in science and genetics she had received while attending the University of Florida.

At the outset, most Beefmaster herds were multi-sired. To achieve control of the herd's breeding and genetics, it was necessary to go to single sires, with detailed records maintained for each animal. In time, this became the requirements for all registered Beefmasters.

"The Breeder of the Year for Beefmaster Breeders United is quite an honor. You have to have cattle that are recognized for many quality characteristics – it's quite a complicated thing – and I was quite proud of that. I can honestly say that the Beefmaster part of my life is a wonderful part. I learned, I grew, I made friends. You know they always say birds of a feather flock together, and I think that's what made BBU so wonderful is because they were just all nice people, good people, conscientious people. And they were always gentlemen. I worked hard and tried to do a good job. I was conscientious in what I tried to do for the association and all the breeders."

– Jennie Lee Zipperer

"What she achieved in Beefmasters Breeders Universal made all of us very proud. I remember she called me when she first decided to do this and said that she purchased a book and was studying cattle and genetics and breeding. That's how she started in the very beginning. And she went from that to becoming the first woman president in a organization of thousands of men."

– Dianne Streid,
daughter

Using sophisticated techniques such as artificial insemination, embryo transfer, and careful selection, she created Beefmaster cattle that have the best possible qualities – including high weight gain and good beef quality – and that also pass those qualities on to their offspring. Feed tests made use of electronic ear tags to identify when a certain animal fed on food that was precisely weighed before and after the animal ate. The animal was weighed every 30 days, and the numbers were correlated to identify those that converted feed the best. But the final test was always the animal's actual performance.

“A purebred is supposed to be a superlative commercial cow, but just because she's got a piece of paper doesn't mean she's any good,” Jennie Lee said. “A cow has to produce a quality product.”



Away from the ranch, Jennie Lee has been active in the Southeastern Beefmaster Breeders Association, where she has held the position of director, secretary, treasurer, vice president, and president. As president of the organization, she was able to achieve over \$1.6 million at the Southeastern Sales Auction, a first for the Beefmaster industry. She also served on the board of directors of the Central States Beefmaster Breeders Association and as vice president of that organization.

At the national level, she served as a member of the board of directors of Beefmasters Breeders United (BBU) and as its vice president. She also served on BBU's Nominating Committee and its Finance and Audit Committee. She chaired the BBU Long Range Planning Committee for two years, and in 1992 was elected the organization's first woman president its 40-year history.

In recognition of her many accomplishments in the Florida cattle industry, Jennie Lee was named the Southeastern Beefmaster Breeders Association's Member of the Year for 1991 and the BBU Breeder of the Year in 1995.

"She purchased her first group of purebred Beefmaster cattle out of Arkansas and we were running those cattle on our Oklahoma ranch. This is when she became very active in the Beefmaster breeding program and the Beefmaster Associations. She eventually got on the board of the Southeastern Beefmasters Breeders Association and then became president. She was appointed to the board of the International Beefmaster Association, served on that for a number of years, eventually became the first female president. She seemed to have a talent for organization. Two years ago we attended the Southeastern Beefmaster Breeders Association annual meeting in Jackson, Mississippi. We weren't there on business, just to see old friends. During the award ceremony they recognized her and she got a standing ovation from the group. So they do remember her."

– John O. Zipperer Jr.,
husband

“It was a very proud moment when my mother was elected the president of the Beefmasters Association. And I say that knowing how macho cowboys are. To be accepted by them as one of their own and to be chosen to lead their association showed their regard for her intelligence, her ability to get things done, and her interest in working hard to promote the association.”

– John O. Zipperer III,
son

“My mother originally started raising cattle when I was a young boy. And she did that along with taking care of kids and being a mother and civic work and other duties that she had.”

– Douglas Zipperer,
son

“In BBU my mother was incredible when it came to staying a feminine woman while conducting business. Mother always taught me never be afraid to be the one to stand out, and do not fear being the one and only, that that is something to be proud of, to be an individual. If I’ve learned anything from her, it’s to be an individual. Do not follow the crowd.”

– Jennie Elizabeth
Zipperer, daughter

Through all her years of ranch work, Jennie Lee has still found time to be part of her community. She has served as a Sunday School teacher, a Den Mother in the Cub Scouts and Brownies, and has been involved in the PTA and other school activities. She has been active in political campaigns, chaired the College Parkway Council, and was appointed to the Lee County Planning Commission. Jennie Lee also helped establish the Jasmine Garden Club and served as president of the Fort Myers/Lee County Garden Council. Her participation in garden clubs began as a means to learn flower arranging for her home, but during her 45-year involvement expanded to include civic functions, flower shows, beautification projects, and helping local governments to adopt needed planning regulations.

“As far as I’m concerned, garden clubs are an important part of agriculture,” she said. “And they’re good promoters of agriculture because they provide ongoing educational programs on horticulture, beautification and the environment.”

Jennie Lee and John have four children – John III, Dianne, Douglas, and Jennie Elizabeth – 11 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.



Previous Winners

- 2002** Annette Barnett Land of Branford
- 2001** Barbara Carlton of Sidell
- 2000** Helen Houck of Perry
- 1999** Vina Jean Banks of Balm
- 1998** Nancy Gurnett Hardy of Winter Haven
- 1997** Gertrude "Trudy" Carey of Hillsborough County
- 1996** Norma Stokes of Highlands County
- 1995** Louve "Vee" Frierson Platt of Clewiston,
and Patricia Robbins of Miami
- 1994** Anne Wardlaw Dickinson of Frostproof
- 1993** Sarah W. Bailey of St. Johns County
- 1992** Carol C. Murphy of Volusia County
- 1991** Ruth M. Tucker of Brevard County
- 1990** Jeanette Barthle of Pasco County
- 1989** Belle Jeffords of Alachua County
- 1988** Carolyn Reed Kempfer of Osceola County
- 1987** Dorothy Conner Shipes of Lake County
- 1986** Ruth Wedgworth of Belle Glade
- 1985** Jo Ann Smith of Marion County



**Florida Department of Agriculture
and Consumer Services**

CHARLES H. BRONSON, Commissioner