

# Delaware Farmer Loves Farming Challenge

**SUSAN MORSE BALDWIN**

**University of Delaware**

NEWARK, Del. — In 1960 Keith Carlisle wasn't sure he wanted to go to college. He did know that he wanted to farm just as his father and grandfather had, and college would mean four more years before he could start. His aunt, a teacher, gave him the encouragement he needed to get the the University of Delaware (UD), and once there, Dean George Worrilow succeeded in keeping him at UD long enough to earn a bachelor's degree in animal science and agricultural engineering. And he's really glad they did.

"It's not just what I learned," says this Sussex County grain and vegetable grower. "It was the people, too . . . I made life-long friends and contacts that have helped make me the farmer I am."

This year at the Agricultural Alumni Association's annual banquet, Carlisle was presented the Worrilow Award, which is given each year to a graduate of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources who has exhibited outstanding service to agriculture

"I was shocked when I learned about the award," says Carlisle. "It is especially meaningful since Dean Worrilow had a great influence on me. I was a country boy from a small downstate high school, and Dean Worrilow looked out for me—he was a real mentor, a fine teacher who knew every student in the college by name."

Carlisle began farming in 1964 near Greenwood. In 1967, he was joined by his brother, Richard. Today, Carlisle Brothers Inc. cultivates 2,800 acres of vegetables and grains. Truly a family business, Carlisle's son Will and two nephews work the farm, and his wife Carol, is the secretary-treasurer of the operation.

Carlisle recalls that when he returned home after college he had doubts about being able to make a living from the sandy soils of southern Delaware. His is one in a long line of Carlisles farming in Sussex County, on a homestead that dates back to a land grant from William Penn.

"This is home, my heart is here," Carlisle says, firmly, punctuating the sentiment with a nod of his head. "The land in Sussex isn't easy to crop—so much sand and very little water. I knew I couldn't farm like my dad did. I needed to adopt new technologies, remain flexible and be willing to change."

Vegetables grown for processing — limas, peas, green beans, sweet corn, and cucumbers — form the core of the business, which is augmented by four agronomic crops — soybeans, corn, wheat and barley — grown for the broiler industry. Fifteen years ago he gradually began the changeover to high-value vegetables destined for processing plants in the Mid-Atlantic region.

"It's a high-risk business, but that's always where the revenue is," says Carlisle, ever the savvy businessman. "I'm still learning. Take spinach—it's a crisis crop—lots can go wrong."

"It's profitable, though," he adds, smiling. "Wouldn't fool with it if it wasn't."



Carlisle used a soil corer to determine if the pea crop needs irrigating. He can tell whether there is enough moisture from the soil texture.

Carlisle says the change was made easier with the help of Cooperative Extension. Ever since he started farming, Carlisle has worked with UD Extension specialists and agents to set up a variety of trials, cropping demonstrations and harvesting equipment research as part of his operation. He calls working with Extension a win-win situation.

"I use university resources, so I have a responsibility to give back," Carlisle explains. "With vegetable cropping, at different times, I have sought the advice of the IPM specialist, the plant pathologist and the vegetable specialist."

Carlisle has remained flexible. In his office, he uses a computer to track his product yield, inputs and profit as well as a fax machine and e-mail to communicate with the world. In the field, he uses satellite technology and a computer equipped tractor to do yield mapping, soil grading and yield monitoring.

Carlisle's service to agriculture has been evident throughout his career. He belongs to the Delaware Crop Improvement Association, the Delaware Crop Improvement Association and Delaware Farm Bureau. He is

former president of the Ag Alumni Association and has been a member of Alpha Zeta since 1961. He is former president of the Mid-Atlantic Soybean Association and a member of the Delaware Soybean Board.

Appointed to the United Soybean Board in 1992 by U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ed Madigan, Carlisle served until 1995. He firmly believes in the checkoff program that finances soybean research and market development. In 1995, he was elected to the Agway Board of Directors. In 1991, he received the Service to Agriculture Award from the Sussex County Service Clubs, and his family operation received the Friend of the Extension award in 1993.

Peas are just beginning to form a pod in one of Carlisle's fields, where he used a soil corer to determine if the crops needs irrigating. His pivot-irrigation system moves around the field on its own, but must be moved from field to field. Carlisle takes care of this, sometimes in the middle of the night.

When does he sleep?

"Winter," he says and although he smiles, you know he means it.

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