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GCIA News Briefs

SUMMER 2024

Plant breeding’s impact on Georgia agriculture

Recently, I had the privilege of attending events honoring two of UGA’s distinguished plant breeders. In April, I attended the UGA CAES Annual Awards Luncheon in Athens. While there were numerous individuals recognized, I was there for one specific individual, Dr. Bill Branch, who was inducted into the Georgia Agriculture Hall of Fame.

From the CAES bio on Dr. Branch, “Throughout his tenure with the University of Georgia’s breeding program, Branch spearheaded groundbreaking research aimed at combating the devastating effects of Tomato Spotted Wilt Virus (TSWV) on peanut crops. His relentless efforts bore fruit with the development of resilient peanut varieties, including the game-changing Georgia Green and Georgia-06G. Branch’s innovative approach not only bolstered farmer resilience but also enhanced consumer satisfaction by prioritizing flavor, nutrition, and shelling characteristics.”

The second event was a retirement celebration honoring Dr. Paul Raymer on June 28 in Griffin where he was recognized for 40 years of dedicated service to UGA. During his time at UGA, Dr. Raymer has served Georgia agriculture as a variety tester, a soybean specialist, a canola breeder and a turfgrass breeder. For the past 15 years, his focus has been on developing improved cultivars of seashore paspalum, tall fescue and creeping bentgrass for high-stress environments. New releases were selected for improved disease resistance and salt and drought tolerance.

Both events were well attended with many accolades shared regarding both men. After attending these events, it got me thinking about the many far-reaching impacts of plant breeders. Where would the turfgrass / green industry be without the work of Dr. Wayne Hanna, developer of such grasses as TifEagle Bermudagrass and TifBlair centipedegrass.

In addition to releasing over 25 soybean varieties, Dr. Roger Boerma provided vital leadership during the formation of the UGA Institute for Plant Breeding, Genetics and Genomics.

And finally, there’s Dr. Brian Schwartz. Dr. Schwartz’s release of TifTuf Bermudagrass has taken the turfgrass industry by storm since its release in 2015. TifTuf is produced by sod farmers around the world and has been used numerous times in major sporting events. While I could go on and on, I hope the point has been made – all of us in agriculture are the beneficiaries of the innovative work done by these and many other plant breeders.

Executive Director, Billy Skaggs

INSIDE

2024 Upcoming Ag Events 2

2024 Upcoming GCIA Ag Events 3

GCIA Buying Point Training Announcement & AOSCA Annual Meeting Update 3

Creature Comforts partners with UGA wheat breeder to create 2024 Get Comfortable brew 4

Creature Comforts partners with UGA wheat breeder to create 2024 Get Comfortable brew 5
 CONTINUED

Officers, Directors & Staff 6



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2024 Upcoming Ag Events:



Georgia / Alabama Seed Associations Convention-July 14-15 Hilton Sandestin Beach Golf Resort & Spa -For more information, contact Billy Skaggs @ billy.skaggs@georgiacrop.com!

UGA Turfgrass Research Field Day– August 7; <https://urbanagcouncil.com/uac-industry-events/#Ievent-list>



American Peanut Shellers Association– Pre Harvest Meeting– August 20-21



Georgia Peanut Tour- September 17-19 Americus, Georgia. For more information, please visit <https://georgiapeanuttour.com/>!



Sunbelt Ag Expo- Oct. 15-17; <https://sunbeltexpo.com/>



2024 GCIA Upcoming Ag Events:



GCIA 2024 Peanut Buying Point Training- August 13 Albany, GA

Information will be sent out soon! Contact Becki or Leslie @ 706-542-2351 with any questions.



The annual meeting of the Association of Official Seed Certifying Agencies (AOSCA) was held June 16-19 in San Destin, FL. Billy Skaggs and Terry Hollifield attended the meeting representing GCIA. Also, Blake Fleeman and Caleb Warrington of Georgia Seed Development attended representing the foundation seed program. Southern Seed Certification Association (SSCA) served as the hosts of the 2024 annual meeting.

As AOSCA President, Skaggs presided over the meeting and provided an association update to all AOSCA members. On Monday, June 17th, the annual AOSCA awards banquet was held; Skaggs was the emcee of the event. Skaggs said the highlight of the evening was recognizing Dr. Jim Bostick of SSCA for 55 years of service. Also during the banquet, Mr. Skaggs was sworn for a second term as AOSCA President. Check out this link to watch a video of the event by Sarah Wilbanks, CEO of AOSCA: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/certifiedseed/posts/?feedView=all>



Creature Comforts partners with UGA wheat breeder to create 2024 Get Comfortable brew

By: Maria M. Lameiras



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Wheat breeders spend years meticulously crossing varieties to coax the best traits out of each species, carefully propagating plant varieties that are healthier, heartier and better suited for the environments where they are grown.

Professional brewmasters are equally painstaking when choosing the components that will give their beers a specific flavor profile.

These two exacting professions came together this spring when Athens-based **Creature Comforts Brewing Co.** reached out to the University of Georgia **College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (CAES)** to find a sustainable wheat variety they could use to make a good beer for a great cause.

Picking the right partner

UGA wheat breeder and geneticist **Mohamed Mergoum** and CAES are the latest partners to work with Creature Comforts on its annual **Get Comfortable** collaboration, for which they produce an annual, limited-run brew to support a community-wide effort to improve educational outcomes for local elementary school students.

"In light of Creature Comforts' recent partnership with **UGA Athletics**, it seemed like the time was right to layer on **another unique intersection with the university**," said Matt Stevens, senior director of community impact for Creature Comforts.

"Over the years we've collaborated on ingredient sourcing with **UGarden**, we've utilized **UGA honey** in some of our mixed fermentation projects, we've even co-produced events with the **Willson Center for Humanities and Arts**. Using our knowledge of UGA's vast network, we set out to identify a faculty member whose research might lend itself to a beer collaboration. Given that beer is an agricultural product, CAES was a natural place to start."

After a few initial contacts, Stevens and Creature Comforts Chief Production Officer and Brewmaster Adam Beauchamp connected with Mergoum, whose research focuses on developing sustainable wheat varieties adapted to growing conditions in the Southeast.

The sustainability equation

The trio met and determined that Mergoum's 'AGS 4023' wheat would be an ideal ingredient for the 2024 Get Comfortable collaboration due to its alignment with the brewer's commitment to sustainability. In 2021, Creature Comforts became a **Certified B Corporation**, for-profit companies that leverage the influence of business to build a more inclusive and sustainable economy. Currently, 99.8% of the spent grain waste produced from the brewery's processes is distributed to local cattle farms as feed, totaling approximately 4 million pounds in 2023.

While wheat is not a major crop in Georgia — it accounted for approximately 1.8% of the state's row and forage crops in 2022 — wheat growers want high-yielding, disease-resistant varieties adapted to regional growing conditions.

Mergoum and his collaborators bred 'AGS 4023' as a high-yielding cultivar that is resistant to most prevalent pests including **fusarium head blight** — also known as scab — a destructive fungal pathogen that can cause low quality and major crop loss. Fusarium head blight is also known to produce a vomitoxin called deoxynivalenol (DON), which is harmful for humans and animals.

"DON causes vomiting at high levels and can cause beer gushing. This is another reason why 'AGS 4023' was selected for this joint venture," said Mergoum, the Georgia Seed Development UGAF Professor in Wheat Breeding and Genetics. Gushing is the unexpected overflow that can occur when opening a beer.

"Sustainable agriculture is something we're wanting to spotlight through this year's Get Comfortable collaboration. Breweries are needing to become more strategic about how we do our ingredient sourcing," Stevens said. "If we can produce a viable, successful small batch using a more sustainable wheat variety, that opens up the possibility for scaling up in the future."

Beer with a science back

Once the wheat was chosen, the work of creating a new beer began. Creature Comforts sourced the AGSouth Genetics 4023 wheat variety from Mixon Seed Service. The wheat was grown by Shepard Family Farms in Miller County, Georgia, then malted at Epiphany Craft Malt in Durham, North Carolina, a small craft malt house dedicated to improving carbon neutrality and sustainable manufacturing, Beauchamp said.

They then brewed a wheat-based beer and split it into small tanks, using a different variety of hops in each version. On Leap Day, Mergoum, Beauchamp and a handful of Creature Comforts staff gathered for a blending lab in the brewery's downtown Athens taproom to create the final recipe for the 2024 Get Comfortable brew.



Creature Comforts partners with UGA wheat breeder to create 2024 Get Comfortable brew Continued:

Sitting around a table lined with cups of hops and glasses of malted wheat, they tasted each component before sampling the hazy, golden base brews. Mergoum, who does not drink, curiously smelled the samples to give his impressions.

"Wheat lightens the body of the beer and makes it easier to drink. Increasing the wheat content gives a lightness and a tanginess," Beauchamp said. "We're looking to find a hop or a blend of hops that we feel like will not overpower the character of this wheat. We are looking to feature the wheat front and center, but beer needs hops for balance."

After three rounds of blending and tasting, the recipe was set. The hazy IPA will have a 35% wheat content — much higher than their other beers — with a blend of Meridian and Crystal hops. According to Creature Comforts, the Get Comfortable Wheated IPA has "a hazy appearance and a delicate, gorgeous foam" and an "aroma ... layered with inviting mango, orange and lemongrass."

The brew will be released on April 12 and will be available on draft at the Athens taproom and at local bars and restaurants, as well as canned and sold through local retailers while supplies last.

Brewing for a better future

The brewery donates 1% of its annual revenue to fund **community impact work**, with Get Comfortable being its flagship impact program — a cross-sector consortium where dozens of local businesses coordinate their philanthropic resources to address consensus community priorities.

In 2021, Creature Comforts consulted its **advisory council** — a standing body of social services professionals — to help identify a single focus area with the aim of achieving a measurable impact over time.

Through their guidance, Get Comfortable committed to increasing the percentage of Clarke County third-grade students reading on grade level from 20% to 60%. Studies show that early literacy has a measurable impact on future employment and economic development among underserved populations.

A pilot literacy mentorship program is currently in place at **H.B. Stroud Elementary** in partnership with **Books For Keeps**, a local nonprofit that supports literacy by expanding children's access to books.

Through this partnership, Creature Comforts employees and community volunteers are oriented, trained and paired with select second- or third-grade students for the duration of the school year to provide an additional hour of one-on-one literacy instruction each week.

The two-year pilot runs through the end of the 2023-24 academic year, after which it will expand into other Clarke County School District elementary schools.

According to its **2023 Impact Report**, the collective generosity of **Get Comfortable funders** has disbursed \$1.87 million to local agencies through the Get Comfortable campaign, representing just a portion of the company's overall \$5 million community impact.

"Creature Comforts is dedicated to fostering human connection and this collaboration brings together many aspects of our community — academia, athletics, sustainability, business, philanthropy and craft beer enthusiasts," said Daniel Reingold, director of key partnerships with the brewery. "With our Get Comfortable Wheated IPA, we are developing a flavor experience celebrating Dr. Mergoum's research and conveying a straightforward yet impactful message — care for your community — to a diverse audience."

Mergoum is proud that his work, like much of the **applied research conducted by CAES scientists**, not only supports agricultural producers, but can foster new ventures using UGA research products for innovative end uses.

"I am very happy to see our cultivars used to generate products that are so different from traditional uses. What is more important for me is the ultimate purpose of this joint venture: to generate funds to help school kids in our community to improve their reading," Mergoum said. "This is a noble cause that we all must support and encourage. Kids are the future of our country and every kid we help to read better will pay off in the future."



Daniel Reingold (left), director of key partnerships with Creature Comforts Brewing Co., and CAES Professor Mohamed Mergoum participate in a blending lab to create this year's Get Comfortable Wheated IPA. (Photos by Katie Walker)

Source: [CAES Newswire](#)



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