GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

4/30/2026

NGB & AAS Announces This Year's Honorees

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National Garden Bureau (NGB) and All-America Selections (AAS) announced that Terry Berke, retired hot pepper breeder from Bayer/Seminis, has been selected as the recipient of the 2026 AAS Breeders' Cup Award. This prestigious award was established 22 years ago to honor breeders whose groundbreaking work has led to the development of new cultivars that have had a profound impact on the industry.

If you've ever felt the slow burn of a perfectly balanced habanero or enjoyed the rich, smoky depth of a gourmet mole, there's a very good chance you have Terry Berke to thank. Often referred to as one of the most prolific pepper breeders in the industry, Terry's career at Seminis (and later Bayer) has been defined by a rare ability to bridge the gap between commercial efficiency and home-garden flavor.

For decades, Terry served as a Lead Pepper Breeder at Seminis Vegetable Seeds, continuing his work after the company was acquired by Bayer Crop Science. Terry's peers and co-workers, Tyler Ash and Pieter Westerbeek, explained that while many breeders focus strictly on yield or disease resistance for commercial shipping, Terry became famous for his "dual-track" success. He developed varieties that could withstand the rigors of large-scale farming while maintaining the nuanced flavor profiles and unique shapes that home gardeners crave.

His work wasn't just about heat; it was about reliability. Terry's breeding programs stabilized many of the pepper types we now take for granted in the produce aisle, ensuring that a habanero or a cayenne looked and tasted consistent every time it was planted.

NGB, AAS and the Home Garden Seed Association also presented its most prestigious accolade, the Medallion of Honor, to Tom Johns, previous president and owner of Territorial Seed Company. While the award recognizes a lifetime of horticultural advancement, the ceremony's most poignant moments focused on Tom's role as a teacher and mentor to the industry's rising leaders.

The Medallion of Honor is reserved for individuals who've dedicated their careers to the advancement of horticulture and significantly raised the visibility of AAS. Tom has been a tireless champion for AAS Winners, ensuring that these high-performing varieties are trialed, proven and promoted to the gardening public.

Tom and his wife, Julie, led Territorial Seed Company from 1985-2022. Under Tom's leadership, the company evolved from a regional specialty outfit into a national powerhouse. A cornerstone of this success is London Spring Farms in Cottage Grove, Oregon, the company's extensive research and trial grounds. There, Tom personally oversaw the rigorous testing of every variety for performance, flavor and adaptability, a "botanical boot camp" that ensures only the best seeds reach the consumer. This tradition continues today under second-generation ownership. **GT**