

GROWERTALKS

GT in Brief

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RIP Harold Wilkins

Chris Beytes

Professor Harold Wilkins, a fixture of the floriculture education and research world for half a century or more passed away January 7 at the age of 87.

According to his obituary—which he wrote, being a very thorough person, said Ball Hort’s Will Healy, one of his many grad students—Harold was born in Cobden, Union County, which is the far southern tip of Illinois. His entire family, including his parents J. Harley and Pauline Wilkins, were involved in the horticulture business.

A 1951 graduate of Anna Jonesboro High School, he attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where he earned his B.S., M.S. and Ph.D. degrees. He also attended Cornell University and spent an additional two years of study in postharvest physiology at the University of Florida at Bradenton.

But he’s best known as Professor Harold Wilkins: From 1966 to 1989 he taught and served as the extension floriculture professor at the University of Minnesota’s Saint Paul campus. Ten Ph.D. students were graduates of Dr. Wilkins’ program and today they lead floriculture education and research at major universities and businesses in the U.S. and Canada.

“Hundreds of his undergraduate students continue to amaze their employers and families with their floral knowledge. Beloved by his many students, he considers them his sons and daughters and their children his grandchildren,” he wrote.

Harold’s research over the years included many floral crops, with a particular focus on cool-weather crops that would require less energy for production. These included Easter lily, freesia, azaleas and alstroemeria. In fact, his research helped create the multi-million-dollar alstroemeria industry here in the U.S. and he’s considered “the father of the alstroemeria industry.” In addition, his research included branching control for roses, carnations and poinsettias.

After retiring from the University of Minnesota in 1989 he consulted in the San Francisco area for one of the largest cut flower and potted flowering wholesale growers in North America. His responsibility was to find and bring into production new species. Thereafter, he was awarded the D.C. Kiplinger Chair at The Ohio State University. Next, he did research at the Hebrew University in Rehovot for two winters, explored for new species at Kirstenbosch Botanic Garden in South Africa for two winters and in Australia for one season.

In November 2004, Harold and his partner, Bryan Gjevre, began a new venture: They purchased an 8-acre farm near Baldwin, Wisconsin, that they dubbed Gold Finch Flowers Farm, where they’ve planted unusual woody and herbaceous ornamentals to sell to floral shops in the Twin Cities and western Wisconsin. They also provide cut

flowers, bouquets and designs for clients of the Mill City Farmers Market in downtown Minneapolis. They did that until 2019, when they “semi-retired.”

Over the years Harold received numerous floriculture industry awards, including admittance to the Society of American Florist's Hall of Fame in 1988. **GT**