Terry L. Ferriss, Ph.D., Receives SAF’s Alex Laurie Award

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — Sept. 14, 2015 — A beloved teacher who helped reintroduce freesia to the commercial cut flower market is the 2015 recipient of the Society of American Florists’ (SAF) Alex Laurie Award. The honor was presented to Terry L. Ferriss, Ph.D., a professor of horticulture at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, in Amelia Island, Florida, on Sept. 12 during SAF Amelia Island 2015, SAF’s 131st Annual Convention.

Established in 1948, SAF’s Alex Laurie Award is named for the eminent professor at The Ohio State University. Over the course of his 60-year career, Laurie laid the groundwork for research that revolutionized the floriculture industry and left a lineage of students, teachers and researchers continuing to provide the information necessary to ensure the industry’s future.

About Terry L. Ferriss, Ph.D.

Terry L. Ferriss, Ph.D., was the first tenured female faculty member in the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences (CAFES) at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls (UWRF) and the first woman to serve as a department chair and as associate dean in the college. She retired, after 36 years in academia, in May 2015.

As a professor of horticulture at UWRF, Ferriss recruited, educated and trained students to become well-prepared professionals. Her students remember her as an inspirational mentor who had practical, firsthand knowledge of the floral industry, provided meaningful hands-on learning experiences alongside theory, set high standards … and walked really fast.

“Terry is tireless in all she does and her intensity has not diminished in the years since she began her faculty position at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls,” said John M. Dole, Ph.D., head of the Department of Horticultural Science at North Carolina State University and the winner of the 2014 Alex Laurie Award. “She has helped to launch an untold number of careers in floriculture and horticulture.”

During her career at UWRF, Ferriss organized and accompanied students on an annual educational trip to another part of the country, to see the horticulture industry in action. She engaged students in undergraduate horticultural research and became a strong advocate and supervisor of internship opportunities for students. She also facilitated the development of numerous scholarship opportunities. Her commitment to developing a pipeline of future industry leaders also reached beyond college students: Among other efforts, she co-developed horticulture lesson plans that link to state
educational standards for third and fourth graders and trained many Master Gardeners.

“Terry has been my professor, mentor, coach and friend,” said Melanie Welles, a former student and the greenhouse manager at George Washington’s Mount Vernon Estate. “I am where I am today because she truly cares about and is dedicated to her students.”

Another former student, Chad Miller, Ph.D., agreed, saying, “As a first-generation college student, graduating from UWRF was a monumental occasion, not only to me, but my family,” said Miller, today an assistant professor of ornamental horticulture at Kansas State University. “I have a picture of her in action, teaching her floriculture class in my office. Whenever I advise students, I regularly share stories related to Terry. She has been a great mentor and role model.”

As a graduate student herself in the 1970s, Ferriss reintroduced freesia as a cut flower and laid the groundwork for potted freesia to be reintroduced into the commercial market. As early as the 1930s, freesia had been commercially produced in the U.S., but production challenges drove the flower out of favor. Ferriss accessed freesia corms through more disease-free sources, and developed a better understanding of the crop’s growth and development and scheduling, to the benefit of the industry at large.

For more than 20 years, Ferriss has been a leading voice in the development of a national professional certification program for horticulture through the American Society for Horticultural Science (ASHS); for many years, she served on and chaired the National Certification Board. Regionally, she has played an active role in promoting professional certification at the state industry level through the Minnesota Nursery and Landscape Association.

In addition to her substantial teaching commitment, which included courses in greenhouse management, interior plantscapes, herbaceous perennials and floriculture production, Ferriss coached the UWRF Floral Crop Quality Evaluation Team for 30 years, leading five teams to first place and hosting the national intercollegiate contest twice. Recognizing her expertise in evaluating the quality of flower and plant material, Ferris was invited to serve as an international judge at the biennial Proflora show in 2009 and 2013.

Ferriss is an active member, past national president and fellow of Pi Alpha Xi, the National Honor Society for Horticulture and she established the Alpha Zeta Chapter of PAX at UWRF. At UWRF, Ferriss was the director of the internship program for the College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences from 1994 to 2015 and chaired the Plant and Earth Science Department from 2006 to 2009.

Ferriss served on the American Floral Endowment’s Vic & Margaret Ball Intern Scholarship Committee from 2001-2015. Her tireless contributions have been recognized by ASHS, which presented Ferriss its Outstanding Undergraduate Horticulture Educator Award in 1989 and Fellows Award in 2012, and by UWRF, which honored Ferriss with Distinguished Teacher of the Year (1996) and the Advisor of the Year (2003). Subsequently, she received the UWRF Compass Award for Outstanding Advising in Support of First Year Students, 2009 and 2013. She also received the USDA National Excellence in Teaching Award, North Central Region, in 1998, among other honors.

Upon her retirement, a photo of Ferriss was placed on the Wall of Honor in UWRF’s College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences. Ferriss is the first female faculty member to receive that honor.

Ferriss earned her bachelors of science degree in horticulture from Colorado State University and her master’s and doctorate degrees in horticulture from the University of Minnesota.

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The Society of American Florists is the leading organization representing all segments of the floral industry. SAF is proud to provide marketing, business and government services to its members, including growers, wholesalers, retailers, suppliers, importers, educators, designers and allied organizations. The association was chartered by an act of Congress in 1884.