Terril Nell, Ph.D., AAF, Receives SAF’s Paul Ecke, Jr. Award

ALEXANDRIA, Va. — Sept. 14, 2015 — One of the country’s top experts in postharvest research — and one of the floral industry’s most passionate and respected ambassadors — received the Society of American Florists’ (SAF) 2015 Paul Ecke, Jr. Award. The honor was presented to Terril A. Nell, Ph.D., AAF, a professor emeritus at the University of Florida and former SAF president, on Sept. 12 during SAF Amelia Island 2015, the association’s 131st Annual Convention in Amelia Island, Florida.

Established in 1984, SAF’s Paul Ecke, Jr. Award recognizes exemplary devotion to profession, industry and community. Previously the SAF Golden Bouquet Award, this award was renamed in 2002 in memory of Paul Ecke, Jr., AAF.

“Terril is a big picture thinker who easily communicates with business owners in any part of the industry,” said SAF Awards Committee member Robert Williams II, AAF, PFCI, Smithers-Oasis - North American Operations in Kent, Ohio. “He is focused on meeting industry needs, dedicated to higher education and has relentless drive to improve the industry’s products. He was also a friend and colleague of Paul’s and someone whom Paul would be immensely happy for and proud of.”

About Terril Nell, Ph.D., AAF

Terril Nell, Ph.D., AAF, who served as a floriculture professor at the University of Florida from 1977 to 2012, developed the school’s postharvest program in 1983 and was instrumental in working with and building its team of experts. Through that program, Nell helped to create a series of far-reaching, streamlined systems and facilities that allowed researchers to address relevant industry problems and quickly disseminate practical information and best practices around the floral industry. Their efforts dramatically enhanced the lifespan and value of flowers and plants such as poinsettias, potted and cut chrysanthemums and potted and cut roses, among many others.

“Terril has always been more concerned with meeting industry needs than publishing a refereed journal article [only] for the academic folks,” said David Clark, Ph.D., of the University of Florida and the 2014 recipient of SAF’s Gold Medal award. “He is always thinking about the bigger picture and impact.”

In fact, much of Nell’s work focused on the total life cycle — and total industry benefit — of scientific research, without regard for personal recognition or gain. By developing, testing and then introducing new breeding screens for poinsettias, for instance, Nell helped set a new standard for the crop, transforming poinsettias from a tall, lanky product that rarely lasted in a
consumer’s home beyond Christmas to a robust and versatile plant that flower lovers and home gardeners now enjoy well into the spring. Under Nell’s guidance, these results — stronger, healthier plants and flowers with higher value for consumers and florists — were replicated again and again with other popular flowers and plants.

As chairman of UF’s Environmental Horticulture Department, from 1991 to 2012, Nell was responsible for directing the statewide teaching, research and extension programs for 35 faculty members in Gainesville, Florida, and at seven Research and Education Centers throughout the state. Thanks to his leadership, the program at the University of Florida is now widely acknowledged to be one of two preeminent environmental horticulture programs in the United States.

“Terril and I clashed like stripes and checks when I was a young faculty member, but he helped shape me,” Clark said. “He taught me how to travel the high road, how to be proud of myself and proud of other people. From him, I learned when to stand up and take the lead and when to step back and hand it off to someone else.”

Nell also created awareness and generated support for the floral industry outside of academia. He was the first academic president of SAF, from 2003 to 2005, and became a frequent and sought-after expert on Capitol Hill and at trade events through his advocacy for the industry, including the installment of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Floral and Nursery Research Initiative, which today helps support important research programs across the country.

“Terril is probably the industry member who is most responsible for getting the Floral and Nursery research Initiative to where it is today,” Clark said. “He testified numerous times; submitted written testimony; lobbied; wrote letters to the Hill; conferred with members of Congress and their staff. He really pushed aggressively for that funding and it paid off.”

Nell, now a professor emeritus at UF, was inducted into the Florida State Florists’ Association Hall of Fame in 2005 and the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association Hall of Fame in 2012, among many other honors. In 1986, he and four other academics were awarded the D.C. Kiplinger Award, from Ohio State University, which recognized Nell’s work with post-harvest recommendations on potted plants. Nell also co-authored SAF’s “Flower and Plant Care Manual,” and is a frequent contributor to the organization’s flagship publication, Floral Management magazine.

For the past 25 years, Nell has served as a domestic and international industry consultant for growers, wholesalers and retailers. He is a member of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Specialty Crop Committee and a board member of the National Foliage Foundation. In 2014, he became the research coordinator for the American Floral Endowment, charged with overseeing the Endowment’s research funding and providing counsel to industry researchers.

Nell is also widely respected for his dedicated community service. While with UF, he chaired the Thomas Center Gardens Committee, which established a public garden surrounding the historic Thomas Center downtown, and at one time chaired boards of both the Thomas Center and the Historic Gainesville civic organization. He also served as senior warden at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, and was on the vestry several times.

Upon his retirement from UF, Nell and his wife, Cathy, moved to a small community outside of Asheville, North Carolina, setting up their new home in the nation's first Audubon Colony. There, he is the volunteer chairman of the Golf Committee and Landscape Committee, among other roles. He and Cathy have been married 44 years. They have two daughters, Amanda and Emily.

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EDITORS: Images from the SAF Awards Presentation and SAF Amelia Island 2015 will be posted on
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.