Donald J. Lisk, professor emeritus of soil chemistry and toxicology and a champion of graduate education, died April 27, 2019. He was 88.

Don grew up in Buffalo, New York, surrounded by many aunts, uncles, and cousins. Later in life, he would recall many fond memories of those early years. He earned his B.A. in Chemistry at the University of Buffalo in 1952. He completed his M.S. (’54) and Ph.D. (’56) in Soil Chemistry at Cornell University. In 1956, Don became the Director of Cornell's Pesticide Residue Lab (later the Toxic Chemicals Laboratory), a position he would hold until his retirement.

Don and his research team specialized in such areas as the analysis of pesticides (DDT and others) in soils, plants and animals; toxic effects in occupationally-exposed populations; and, the dietary inhibition of cancer. One study in the early 1970's examined the use of flame retardants in children's pajamas. When all the goldfish in large tanks died after the fabric was added to the water, red flags went up in the industry. In Don's words, it also "proved that goldfish
should never wear kids' pajamas."

Don was an early proponent of foods as “nutraceuticals” including the value of crops like garlic, onions, and other foods high in selenium. “He was particularly interested in the relationship among horticultural practices, pesticide use and cancer incidence, having strong collaborations with the Roswell Park Cancer Center in Buffalo,” said Marvin Pritts, professor of horticulture.

Don’s departmental affiliations shifted from entomology to food science, and finally, to the Department of Vegetable Crops. He retired as a professor emeritus in 1995 from the Department of Fruit and Vegetable Science. Retirement did not slow him down. A post-retirement rehire agreement allowed him to continue to lead the Toxic Chemicals Laboratory, and he worked as a faculty member in the fruit and vegetable science department until 1999. From 2002 through 2004, he conducted research with colleagues in the Department of Horticulture, which is now an integral Section of the School of Integrative Plant Science.

During his lengthy career at Cornell, Don authored approximately 500 journal publications detailing his research. He also acted as a graduate advisor and informal mentor to many students over the years. “Although Don was primarily a researcher, he was committed to graduate students and, upon his retirement, left a substantial amount of unrestricted funds to the Department of Horticulture to support graduate education,” said Marvin Pritts. “Don was always willing to take time to learn about what others were doing and share exciting findings from his own work.”

Along with advising and mentoring many students over his career, Don was a reviewer for the National Institutes of Health, the National Institutes of Environmental Health Sciences, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Library of Medicine. He collaborated with Roswell Park Cancer Institute in Buffalo and served as a consultant to review panels for the National Academy of Sciences, the Exxon Research and Engineering Co., and General Electric Co. Don served on multiple editorial boards for scientific journals, as well.
Following his retirement, Don enjoyed extensive travel in the United States, Canada, Europe, Central America, Australia, and New Zealand, with his wife and friends. He volunteered weekly with Loaves & Fishes of Tompkins County, and was an usher and greeter at Holy Cross Church in Freeville, as well as a member of their Buildings and Grounds committee. During retirement, he also rekindled a childhood hobby of word working, building and giving away over 1,000 birdhouses.

From an early age, Don loved singing, whistling and listening to music. As a young boy, while helping his stepfather build their house, he became determined to build his own house one day. Shortly after his marriage to Nan in 1959, he began building their home in Freeville, New York where they would eventually raise their four children. During his working years, he took daily walks around the Cornell Botanic Gardens. Don also liked to garden, attend lectures, theatre, and musical performances. Most of all, Don enjoyed making others laugh. He wrote and recited countless humorous poems about friends, memorable events, trips taken, and colleagues retiring, all in his signature rhyming style.

Don is survived by his wife of 59 years, Nanette (Riester) Lisk of Freeville, New York; daughters Sue Lisk of Silver Spring, Maryland; Marion (Bryan) French of Conesus, New York; Eileen Lisk (David Long) of Saint Petersburg, Florida; son Tom (Robin) Lisk of Mukilteo, Washington; and grandsons Jacob French, Noah French and Bryan Mendives.

Written by Steve Reiners