Joseph Sieczka, professor emeritus of horticulture and worldwide expert on potatoes, died July 29, 2018 at his home in Mattituck, New York. He was 79 years old.

Hailing from Blasdell, New York, outside Buffalo, New York, Joe received an associate degree in agronomy and soil conservation from the State University of New York at Alfred, in 1960. It was at SUNY Alfred that Joe, the vice president and social director of his fraternity, would often break out in song with his deep baritone voice. Singing and dancing were always a big part of his life, his daughter Liz, reminisced, remembering her dad as someone who could be very serious at times, especially when he spoke in his deep, stern voice. But then, he’d break out in song. “Everybody would laugh, ‘Oh, Dad, not again,’ ” she recalled. “He could go from spouting off scientific data to being goofy.”

After receiving his associate degree, Joe worked briefly at Birdseye in Avon, New York and originally planned to join the U.S. Navy and “see the world.” Those plans changed when he and his friend, Fred Muehlbauer, stopped at the University of Georgia in Athens,
Georgia to visit some friends working on degrees in agronomy. There they met the department chair who convinced them to stay on for bachelor’s degrees, a degree Joe received in 1963. He immediately came back to New York, joining Cornell Cooperative Extension, as an extension educator, in Steuben County. It was to be the start of a long career with Cornell, lasting almost 40 years.

In 1968, Joe joined the Department of Vegetable Crops as an Extension Specialist, received his M.S. from Cornell in 1973, and became associate professor in 1981. His research and extension program focused on horticultural aspects of potatoes, but also studied numerous other vegetables. In 1980, he became coordinator of the Long Island Horticultural Research and Extension Center at Riverhead, where he stayed until he retired in 2002.

Though he conducted research on many vegetable crops, Joe focused on potatoes. He evaluated nitrogen rates and spacing for promising clones and newly named varieties to determine optimum cultural practices. He also conducted rate experiments which led to growers reducing phosphorus fertilizers by 50%. He evaluated the effects on yield and quality of other nutrients such as calcium. Due to the concerns of nitrate in the groundwater on New York’s Long Island, Joe conducted nitrogen leaching studies. Evaluation of pre-emergence and post-emergence herbicides and vine desiccants were conducted, including evaluating the effects of vine killers on Colorado potato beetles. Most fumigants were banned from use on Long Island. Research demonstrated that marigolds could control root-lesion nematodes, however it was difficult to seed this crop. Joe evaluated commercial planters for field seeding raw marigold seeds and investigated marigolds as a rotational crop with potatoes and other vegetable crops.

Working with the Cornell potato breeding program, he helped develop twelve new potato varieties, all of which are resistant to golden nematodes, a major international potato pest. As a collaborator in the Golden Nematode Technical Work Group, comprised of extension, university, state and federal players, this group received the “United States Department of Agriculture Certificate of Merit.”
Joe shared his expertise and efforts in developing new potato varieties with the entire east coast potato community. He participated in the regional project NE-107 (then NE184) with potato researchers from nine eastern states. During this period, he was involved in the release of four varieties from the USDA-Beltsville breeding program and two from the University of Maine. These efforts received the “Northeastern State Agricultural Experiment Station Directors’ Award for Regional Research Excellence” for participation in regional project NE-184, which had the goal of developing new potato clones for environmental and economical sustainability in the Northeast.

He had been an active member of the Potato Association of America (PAA), a professional society for the advancement of knowledge on all aspects of the potato. He served in many capacities, including as President (1993) and was elected an Honorary Life Member (2000), the highest award bestowed by that organization. Joe was co-chair of the local arrangements committees which hosted the PAA annual meetings in Buffalo (2008) and in Ithaca, (1986). He was co-author of two editions of the association’s handbook, “Commercial Potato Production in North America.” Joe was also a co-author of “The Complete Book of Potatoes: What Every Grower and Gardener Needs to Know.”

“Joe was extremely knowledgeable in all things ‘potato’ and had an encyclopedic memory,” said Donald Halseth, professor emeritus of Horticulture. “He knew things about more potato varieties than anyone I have known. During the 1980s, at the PAA summer meetings where variety ID field plots were held, Joe consistently was able to identify more lines than anyone, even when most of the entries were not even grown in the eastern U.S.” Dale Moyer, former potato specialist and agriculture program director for Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County, mentioned “I always remember Joe telling both new and old staff during harvesting and grading, usually several times a year – ‘treat the potatoes like eggs.’” “From a personal point of view, I always valued the uncommon amount of ‘common sense’ that Joe showed when I would ask for his advice, which I did very often,” said Elmer Ewing,
professor emeritus of Horticulture. “He had sound judgment on important issues and was able to see the broad picture.”

Joe spent substantial time researching other vegetable crops. He investigated broccoli varieties, plant population studies, suitable herbicides and post-harvest handling for the crop’s production and marketing on Long Island. This was an effort to develop an alternative or rotation crop for potato growers. Joe worked on variety selection, fertilizer rates and cultural practice trials on sweet corn, peppers, tomatoes, onions, broccoli, cauliflower, brussel sprouts, kale, cabbage, specialty melons, winter squash, pumpkins and calabaza (tropical pumpkins). Joe conducted nitrogen rate and timing at planting and sidedress studies for sweet corn to determine the most efficient rates and methods for high production and to minimize nitrate impacts to the groundwater. He evaluated the use of Pre-sidedress Soil Nitrate Tests (PSNT) in cabbage and sweet corn production. This was also an effort to minimize nitrate leaching into the groundwater. As herbicides were removed from the market on Long Island, weed management became an issue for the vegetable growers. In the late 90s, Joe evaluated innovative cultivation equipment including the brush hoe and finger tine weeder.

“Joe had an incredible knowledge of potatoes,” said Steve Reiners, chair of Cornell’s Horticulture Section. “But if I saw anything odd in any vegetable crop, he was the first person I called as he could always recall a similar problem and, more importantly, a solution from the past. I miss his incredible knowledge and recall. He was a great mentor for me as he was to countless other extension educators.” “Joe was such a noted expert on potatoes and other vegetable crops that it earned him tremendous respect from the entire agriculture community,” said Mark Bridgen, professor in the School of Integrative Plant Science and the current director of the Long Island Horticultural Research and Extension Center.

After retirement, Joe would always be eager to make grower visits to discuss production practices, new variety performance, or diagnose production issues. He was very willing to assist extension educators with questions. His nearly forty years of experience was
invaluable to growers and extension personnel.

While working as an extension educator in Steuben County, Joe met the extension home economist there, Mary Ann Sabolsky. Mary Ann had grown up in Marianna, Pennsylvania and came to New York after receiving her degree at Mercyhurst College. The two married in 1966. Mary Ann passed away in 2014, after nearly 48 years of marriage. She implored her husband to remain active and continue doing what he loved - singing, dancing and traveling. He made good on that promise. He was a long-standing member and past president of the North Fork Community Theatre and belonged to numerous singing and dancing groups and clubs. Joe even performed at open mic nights, both locally and in The Villages, Florida, singing show tunes primarily.

In addition to performing and travel, Joe’s hobbies included gardening, biking, and swimming, with golf and pickleball added in retirement. He enjoyed working on old cars, including 1937 and 1939 Chevrolet Coupes and a 1955 Cadillac, and was a member and secretary of the Peconic Bay Region Antique Automobile Club of America. “He was very active until the last minute,” said his daughter Liz.

Joe enjoyed traveling both in the U.S. and internationally. He planned to take each of his five grandchildren on trips. In 2018, shortly before his death, he traveled to London and Paris with two of his grandchildren, Jessica and Lucia. Earlier he took another granddaughter, Kimberly, to Poland. Sadly, grandsons James and Alexander missed their opportunity to travel with their grandfather.

Joe was predeceased by his wife Mary Ann in 2014. He is survived by their children, Elizabeth (James Felakos) of Brooklyn, New York, Michael (Heather Cameron) of Bellingham, Washington, and Michelle (David) Scheer of Mattituck, New York; and grandchildren Kimberly and Jessica Scheer, Lucia Sieczka, and James and Alexander Felakos.

*Written by Donald E. Halseth, Dale D. Moyer, and William J. Sanok*