Raymond T. Fox,
professor emeritus of floriculture and ornamental horticulture and renowned for his elaborate campus floral displays and floriculture expertise, died March 31 in Ithaca, New York. He was 96.

Ray was born and raised in Corning, New York and graduated from Corning Free Academy in 1939. He matriculated at Cornell in 1940 but in 1942, enlisted in the US Army Engineers and was trained as a cartographer (T5) in the 648 Phototropic Engineers. He was stationed in Australia, and later Papua, New Guinea. During this time Ray made high quality maps from aerial photographs for the higher levels of command in the Pacific theatre. He was a talented artist and in this way, he used his gift in service to his country.

After World War II, Ray went to Cornell University where he received his bachelor’s degree (Cornell class of ’47). It was there that he met his future wife, Vera Hakanson (Cornell class of ’48), He continued his education at Cornell and received his M.S. in 1952, and finally his Ph.D. in Agriculture & Life Sciences in 1956. Ray began his Cornell career as an instructor in the Department of
Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture, the same year he graduated, 1947. He subsequently earned his master’s and doctorate, also at Cornell, and was promoted to full professor in 1979, serving until his retirement in 1987.

Dr. Fox’s academic pursuits focused on teaching and outreach. He taught popular courses in floral design and retail flower store management. “He bled Cornell red and trained generations of florists,” said Bill Miller, professor of Horticulture and director of Cornell’s Flower Bulb Research Program. Dr. Fox was legendary for tirelessly organizing and leading brigades of volunteers to set up floral displays at campus events, even after his retirement.

In his address at the university’s 129th Commencement in 1997, then-university president Hunter R. Rawlings III paid him tribute: “[This] Commencement represents the 50th year that Professor Fox, with help from an enthusiastic band of volunteers, has coordinated the floral arrangements for Commencement Weekend. For 50 years, his has been truly a labor of love.”

Equally spectacular were his holiday decorations at Sage Chapel, which often included elaborate, tree-like poinsettia arrangements.

“He was a superb floral designer – both in composition of a single piece as well as grand displays,” said Professor Emeritus Tom Weiler, former chair of the Department of Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture. Roy was a key figure at the now-defunct New York Flower Show and the iconic spring flower display at Macy’s department store in New York City.

“To appreciate Fox’s contributions requires an understanding of how the floriculture industry has changed since its heyday”, Weiler said.

“In the 1950s and 1960s, you never saw ‘in lieu of flowers’ on funeral announcements,” he said. “Elaborate floral arrangements were essential at most every social occasion from weddings and funerals to dances and other public functions. “The emphasis was on locally produced flowers,” Weiler said. “Cut flowers were a much
larger segment of New York’s greenhouse production, and Ray was the center of Cornell’s support of retail florists.”

Ray was a sought after speaker for florist organizations, garden clubs and county Cornell Cooperative Extension audiences. He authored or co-authored many popular consumer publications, including “The Selection, Care, and Use of Plants in the Home” and “Techniques for Propagation of Plants for Interior Decoration.” He also devoted time to community service, developing horticulture therapy programs at local senior centers, leading international garden tours and holding leadership positions in the Liberty Hyde Bailey Garden Club.

Ray and Vera were married on June 30, 1951 and remained in Ithaca where they became fully involved in Cornell University teaching and flower decoration businesses. They were sought after for wedding planning and decorations, presidential inaugurations, the Lake Placid Olympics, and the wedding of Vera's niece Karen (Hakanson) Schreiber. They eventually conducted the business in their home where a shop is still completely furnished with full flower decorating capability. The outside of their home is testament to their passion in decorating using floral and landscape motifs. Ray has a special gift at his home which commemorates 50 years of floral decorations for Cornell graduation ceremonies, that he oversaw and in which he personally participated.

Ray retired from Cornell in 1987. In his letter to then department chair Carl Gortzig, he wrote, “It is naturally with great regret that I send this letter, since the department has been “home” to me, both as a student and as a faculty member, since 1940. But I feel it is also right to leave the way open to younger people who are attracted to our field and who need a starting point.”

As time passed, Ray and Vera travelled during summers, taking tour groups to exotic locations often booking "tramp steamers" to get to their location. They went to northern Europe and Southeast Asia. Their travels provided them with prolific numbers of photographic slides for educational slide shows which were done on campus for many years.
Ray will continue to enrich the lives of young Cornell horticulture students for many years to come. An endowment in his name is being established due to a generous gift from his estate. Ray would have been delighted to know that he is making it a little easier for young people “who need a starting point” in the field of floriculture.

Sadly, Ray was predeceased by his wife Vera (Hakanson) Fox, of 58 years in 2009. He is survived by eight nieces and nephews on his side of the family and five nieces and nephews on his wife's side of the family. He has 16 or more grand nieces and nephews. He loved family and was always available to help with weddings, holidays, and birthdays. He also has his special friends Fran and Joe Dannelley, who have made his last few decades his "Golden Years". His family owes them a huge debt of gratitude.

Written by Steve Reiners