Dr. Roger Way, world-renown pomologist and fruit breeder, and emeritus professor of horticultural science, died on June 2, 2019 at the age of 100.

Roger was born November 7, 1918 in Stormstown, Pennsylvania on a fruit and dairy farm that is still run by family. Roger earned both his Bachelor of Science degree (1940) and his Master of Science degree (1942) in Horticulture from Pennsylvania State University.

Roger was a Quaker and he declared conscientious objector status in 1942, after receiving his selective service notice during World War II. Roger spent four years in a Civilian Public Service Camp in Maryland. After the war, he spent two years doing relief work in rural China for the Quaker Organization, American Friends Service Committee. This organization received the Nobel Prize in 1947 in recognition of their activities.

Roger was hired as a research assistant at Cornell in 1949 and quickly was promoted to a research associate. He received his Ph.D. from Cornell in 1953 and became an assistant professor that same
year. Roger was located at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, New York, which is now called Cornell AgriTech. Roger was promoted to associate professor in 1959 and to full professor in 1970. He served as acting department head of the Department of Pomology and Viticulture in 1974 and 1982-1983 and was head of the department in 1983. He retired and was granted professor emeritus status in 1983 as well. Roger continued to work for 16 years after his retirement.


In 1982, Roger received the Wilder Medal from the American Pomological Society in recognition of his work in apple cherry and elderberry breeding. Roger received the Milo Gibson Award in 1986 from the North American Fruit Explorers in recognition of his “many improved fruit varieties.”

Roger received great notoriety for his release of ‘Empire’ and ‘Jonagold’ apples, both for their quality, but also due to their positive impact nationally and internationally. ‘Empire’ ranks #10 in apples produced in the U.S. In the late 1980s, New York growers planted more than 50,000 ‘Empire trees annually. From 1988 to 1990, 27 percent of all apple trees planted in New York were ‘Empire’. From 1996-2004 the annual production of Empire in the U.S. averaged 4.2 M bushels with a fresh market value of 41.1 million dollars. At that time, New York growers produced 50 percent of the total U.S. ‘Empire’ crop.

‘Jonagold’ is one of the major varieties grown worldwide. It ranks sixth overall in world rankings, with production of 1,078 thousand metric tons. (Note: Production in China is excluded from these
‘Jonagold’ also accounts for nearly 60 percent of apple production in Belgium. Japan was so enamored with ‘Jonagold’ that they invited Roger and his wife Mary to Japan and presented Roger with a Samurai warrior’s helmet in honor of his introduction of ‘Jonagold’ in Japan.

Roger conducted research of benefit to the industry and gave equal attention to scientific refereed publications and extension articles and bulletins of use to the fruit industry and growers. He studied the role of crabapple trees and blossoms as an efficient means of providing pollen for cross pollination in orchards, and with collaborators he studied the suitability of new selections and varieties for the processing industry. Roger wrote bulletins on pollination, orchard layout and design to maximize fruit set and these bulletin were a valuable resource in teaching and for orchard managers. Roger and Dr. Gilmer proved that key cherry viruses were pollen-transmitted, which was crucial knowledge for growers and nurseries. Roger also documented a lethal gene that impacted apple hybridization decisions, and this was shown by a recent Cornell graduate student (Ben Orcheski) to be due to an inability to produce vitamin K (phylloquinone), and likely linked to genes with favorable effects.

In 1984, Roger was both heralded, and teased in a People Magazine article “A couple hundred of apples a day keep Dr. Roger Way feeling good to the core.” In the game show, Jeopardy’, under a “By-The-Way” category, the $400 clue was “Roger Way tasted 200 of these a day, helping him to develop ‘Empire and Jonagold’ types. Answer: What are apples? A local newspaper article on Roger’s death suggested that maybe the 200 apples a day for 50 years explained Roger’s longevity. Roger was also interviewed for Charles Osgood/CBS news in 1983, where he can be seen biting into multiple apples, discussing research and with a broad smile, asking “everyone loves apples, don’t they?’

Rogers work-ethic, his passion for apples, his knowledge base, and his attention to detail were well known, as was the fact that his work boots always had a spotless shine and his lunch was transported to work in a black metal lunch pail. He was a natural during grower
tours, where his voice was heard above any noise.

Roger’s colleague, Dr. Bruce Reisch said that “Dr. Way earned the respect of both his peers and his industry stakeholders. He was dedicated, motivated and driven to excel, and was also one of the most even-keeled individuals I’ve ever known. He was careful, thoughtful, and methodical. Fellow plant breeders always admired him for the success of the high-quality apples he developed.”

I had the honor of being Roger’s successor and he, and his family, were incredibly generous to me. The Way home was one of the first to welcome my husband and me for dinner. Roger was a world expert and revered by the US industry, especially in New York. Yet, as soon as I started with cherries and then apples, Roger insisted that questions be directed to me. He offered advice to me, but let me learn and gain the respect of the industry. I will be forever grateful for his kindness and his vote of confidence. He took me to meet key industry members the day before I officially started, and I believe he was pleased that I was ready to start, no matter the date.

Roger is survived by his wife, Mary of State College, Pennsylvania, son, Edward and his wife, Sue of Carbondale, Colorado, their daughter, Vanessa of Glenwood Springs, Colorado, son, Charles of San Diego, California, son, Thomas of Auburn, Alabama, and daughter, Shirley of Ithaca, New York. Roger’s legacy lives on through his family and his many contributions to pomology and breeding.

Written by Susan K. Brown