Robert Seaney, Ph.D. ’55, professor emeritus of soil and crop sciences, who was known for his research on identifying the best forages for New York state soils and climate, died January 19, 2021 in Petersburg, Illinois. He was 93. Born January 23, 1927, in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Seaney served in the U.S. Army before earning his bachelor’s degree in biology from Purdue University in 1951. He received his Ph.D. in plant breeding from Cornell, and then joined the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS) as an assistant professor of plant breeding and agronomy. Seaney was promoted to associate professor in 1961.

Professor Seaney was an excellent communicator and was widely respected by colleagues, extension agents and farmers. Through his research and extension program, he had a large impact on improving forage production on livestock farms in New York state. During his 35 years at CALS, Professor Seaney collaborated closely with Professor Danny Fox to develop the Cornell University Hillside Pasture Research and Demonstration Project at the Harford Animal Science Teaching and Research Center. The goal of this project was to evaluate the potential for using the approximately 3 million acres of underutilized and abandoned hillside farmland in New York as grasslands for grazing beef and dairy cattle.

Professor Seaney was very committed to transferring the results through his extension program to help beef and dairy cattle producers improve their profitability. From 1978 to 1990, Seaney worked to identify the best forage species for the state’s soil and climate conditions. He also spent time developing forage management practices that would better support the high productivity of grazing cattle throughout the growing season.

As part of their extension programming, Seaney and Fox held tours and field days for cattle producers to learn more about specific techniques. For example, Seaney discovered that alfalfa is more likely to survive freeze-and-thaw heaving cycles when it’s mixed into a hay stand, instead of left standing on its own — thanks to the fibrous root networks of grasses that act like a shock absorber.
Seaney retired on October 31, 1989, and was named professor emeritus in March 1990. He and his wife, Patricia, operated Seaney Greenhouses in Newfield, New York, until they moved to Illinois in 2003. He then helped his son build a state-of-the-art greenhouse, currently 20,000 square feet and home to more than 100 types of perennials and annual bedding plants.

Seaney is survived by his wife, Patricia "Pat" Seaney; four children, Roy Seaney of Tallula, Illinois, Kathy Berry of Ithaca, New York, Linda Seaney (Tom Sarchioto) of Trumansburg, New York, and Janice Seaney of Seaside, Oregon; two stepchildren, Bill Schultz of Salt Lake City, Utah, and Heidi Schultz (Matt Bellingham) of Portland, Oregon; grandchildren, step grandchildren, great grandchildren, and cousins.

Written by Danny Fox, Gary Fick, and Ronnie Coffman