Dr. Donald (Don) Wilbur Barton, professor emeritus of horticulture, passed away on October 7, 2021 in Canandaigua, New York at 100 years.

Don was born June 12, 1921, in Fresno, California. He earned a B.S. in plant science in 1947 and Ph.D. in genetics in 1949, both from the University of California at Berkeley. His education was postponed due to World War II as he served in the U.S. Air Force from 1943-46. Tragically, on Don’s 20th mission his plane was shot down by German fighter aircraft and he was captured and held prisoner of war for almost one year. He received the Air Medal, Purple Heart Medal, and the Prisoner of War Medal; Don was Honorably Discharged from service with the rank of First Lieutenant in 1946.

Don came to Cornell in 1951 as an associate professor in the Department of Vegetable Crops at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station (NYSAES) in Geneva (currently known as Cornell AgriTech). His research focused on breeding disease-resistant pea and sweet corn varieties until 1959. In 1960, he became the ninth director of NYSAES, a role in which he served until his
retirement in 1983. Don had a significant impact on the growth of the Geneva campus and oversaw numerous capital projects during his tenure, including the construction of four new campus buildings and one which Cornell University and the Board of Trustees voted to name Barton Laboratory in Don’s honor.

Don oversaw the purchase of four properties that continue to be critical to the Experiment Station’s research: The Fruit and Vegetable Research Farm, Lucey Farm, the Hudson Valley Research Laboratory, and Wellington Farm. He advocated for efforts to conserve fruit, nut and vegetable germplasm and co-authored an impactful paper on the importance of national repositories of valuable crops. This led to the creation of the United States Department of Agriculture’s germplasm repository on the Experiment Station campus, and at multiple locations across the country. The USDA-Agricultural Research Service has grown in mission and size to become a major contributor to mission-oriented science on the Cornell AgriTech campus today.

He also expanded the research farms and strengthened relationships with growers, industry leaders, and state officials. He prioritized establishing strong relationships with vegetable growers, food processors, and state officials responsible for funding that could benefit Experiment Station research, which would in turn bring benefits to its stakeholders. He led the expansion of research into grape and wine, supporting development of new varieties and encouraged the passage of New York’s 1976 Farm Winery Legislation, which helped the state’s emerging wine industry to flourish.

Don was tuned-in and supportive of the concerns and needs of all NYSAES employees. He and his wife Ginny promoted a family atmosphere at the station and participated in all social events. The holiday parties they initially held at their residence were appreciated by all. Don’s supportive style was exemplified by his efforts to lobby CALS leadership to match funds raised by employees to build the baseball field, adjoining pavilion, and picnic tables enjoyed by many in the area behind Jordan Hall. Following Don’s retirement,
he served as an agricultural research consultant in 17 countries, including the Philippines, Indonesia, Afghanistan, India, Ghana, and Bangladesh. In 2019, Don was inducted into the New York State Senate Veterans Hall of Fame for the 54th Senate District.

Don served on numerous local, national, and international task forces, boards and committees in the interest of science as related to Cornell University and agriculture around the world. He was a member of the American Society for Horticultural Science, Genetics Society of America, International Society for Horticultural Science, and Sigma XI. He received recognition and awards for his significant contributions, including being named Fellow of the American Society for Horticultural Science in 1973.

Don was predeceased by his wife, Ginny (Virginia Winston Barton), in 2007 after 63 years of marriage; and by his sister, Geraldine in 2011. He is survived by his four children Paul and wife Amy Hagberg of Limerick, Maine, Ken and wife Michelle of Wildwood, Missouri, Donna and husband Denis O'Leary of South Bend, Indiana, and Alan of Watkins Glen, New York. He also leaves four grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren; along with two nieces, a nephew, cousins, second cousins, and many more distant relatives. Don enjoyed the last 13 years of his life with his companion, Adrienne O’Brien of Canandaigua, New York.

Written by Jana VanHouten, Bruce I. Reisch, Alan Taylor, George Abawi, and Mary-Lou Dumbleton