Stanton Shannon, Emeritus Professor of Vegetable Crops/Horticulture, and a world class vegetable physiologist, passed away on January 6, 2022, at the Pacifica Senior Living Center in Riverside, California. He was 93 years old.

Born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona, he was the third of four brothers. He grew up on the family’s citrus ranch where he first showed an interest in soils and plants. Aware of the soil fertility challenges he experienced at the family ranch, he studied soils at first, before developing an interest in plant physiology and biochemistry, receiving both his B.S. and M.S. from the University of Arizona. The first refereed publication of his career was published in the very first issue of Forest Science in 1955 and summarized his Master’s degree research that examined the effect of burning on forest soils.

In September 1953, Professor Shannon entered the U.S. Army for a two-year enlistment. Nine months were spent in the Chemical Corps teaching chemical, biological, and radiological defense. The remaining time was spent as topographical surveyor in the Army
Corps of Engineers, including three-months duty in Northwestern Alaska.

After finishing his service, he accepted a position with the University of California’s Citrus Experiment Station in Riverside, California, working in the soils department as a senior lab technician. One afternoon, while playing volleyball at the faculty club, his life would change forever, as he would meet his future wife, Muriel ‘Nickie’ Carter. They were married in December 1956 and would go on to celebrate 65 happy years together.

Soon after marrying, Professor Shannon moved to Davis, California to pursue a Ph.D. in plant physiology at the University of California. Finishing his degree in 1961, he was immediately offered a position as an assistant professor in the Vegetable Crops department at Cornell University, at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, New York.

Professor Shannon researched a variety of vegetable crops during his 25-year tenure at Cornell. In particular, he developed new methods to perform rapid detection of curcurbitacins in squash. Curcurbitacins are highly toxic, bitter compounds that naturally occur in the family of plants that include cucumbers, pumpkins, melons, watermelons, and squash. These bitter compounds protect wild plants against predators, but they are undesirable in commercially grown fruits and vegetables. Early detection of these compounds enabled plant breeders to select better-tasting varieties.

He was also one of the first researchers to study how sex expression in cucurbit crops like cucumber could be manipulated with plant hormones and plant growth regulators. He worked closely with the vegetable industry and his research led to higher yields and a more concentrated fruit set in cucumbers. Professor Shannon, working with his colleague Bob Becker, established the first processing sweet corn variety trials at Cornell, a program which continues to this day.

In addition, Professor Shannon conducted studies on table beets,
examining everything from the optimum plant populations to produce the most desired size of beets for processing to developing accurate soil fertility guidelines. What was particularly impressive about his research was how he worked with specialists in breeding, pest management, and particularly in food science. Professor Shannon was an excellent mentor and shared his insights and lab facilities with new assistant professors and many others in the Department of Seed and Vegetables Sciences.

His inclusive approach to research provided growers and processors answers to many of their problems. He was a valued cooperator not only with his colleagues at Cornell, but with peers around the country. This was most evident in his work on using growth retardants on tomato transplants to increase yield and a more concentrated fruit set for mechanical harvesting. Nearly a dozen universities, the USDA, and several private companies participated in the work he led.

With more than 50 publications in his tenure at Cornell, Professor Shannon published his work across the scientific spectrum. Besides the usual horticultural journals, his work could be found in food science journals as well as top journals like Science and Nature. He was comfortable explaining his work to anyone: farmers, processors, and top scientists around the world.

After 25 years, Professor Shannon retired from Cornell in 1986 but far from slowing down, he started a whole new phase of his career. He purchased a 40-acre farm, not far from the Experiment Station, that he christened ‘Chestnut Ridge Farm.’ The farm served as a private research farm where seed companies could trial new varieties under the watchful eye of Professor Shannon. In addition, he grew asparagus and sweet corn for local markets. He also found time to work on his pet project, the restoration of the American Chestnut. He planted a hedgerow of back-crossed American-Chinese chestnut hybrids and lived to see them become remarkably productive trees. He was harvesting at least a couple of bushels of nuts each fall by the early 2000s.
The farm was a beloved pet project that kept him busy for more than 15 years in retirement. It also afforded him and his wife the ability to ‘snow-bird’ in Southern California each winter, buying a home in Riverside to be close to Nickie’s mother. In 2003, they sold the farm and moved full-time to California.

Professor Shannon was a longtime resident of Phelps, New York, and very active in many organizations. These included the Phelps Town Board, the Phelps Library Board, Little League, and as an elder in the Presbyterian Church. He and Nickie loved Phelps and its small-town ambiance. It was a great place to raise their two sons, Scott and Clayton. Professor Shannon was an avid gardener, and his home was surrounded by an acre of perennials and vegetables, all irrigated with series of pumps and pipes he personally designed and built.

Professor Shannon and his wife Nickie were also avid golfers and would play on courses around the country as they made their annual trips to California. They continued to play and enjoy the game well into their 80s. They also enjoyed travel and visited the United Kingdom where they enjoyed the gardens and of course, also played golf.

He is survived by his wife Nickie; sons Scott (Norma) of Cazenovia, New York, and Clayton, (Diane) of Arroyo Grande, California; five grandchildren Kari (Matt) of Windsor, Connecticut, Anthony (Hannah) of Hermosa Beach, California, Catherine of Manhattan Beach, California, Timothy of Manhattan Beach, California, and Niall currently with the Coast Guard; sisters-in-law Martha Martin (Clair) of San Diego, and Karen Shannon of Phoenix.

Professor Shannon lived a long and fulfilling life. He will be remembered as a loving husband and father, a dedicated professor and colleague, and a person always willing to share his time and expertise with his community.

Written by Steve Reiners and Alan G. Taylor