

Vince Lawson: A Career of Leadership in Agricultural Research and Extension

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Vince Lawson, superintendent since 1982 of the ISU Muscatine Island Research and Demonstration Farm, Fruitland, Iowa, retired in January 2017. His work epitomizes the land-grant ideal of responding to community needs with technical expertise, applied research, and extension programming. One ISU administrator stated: “Vince Lawson is a legendary figure in agriculture/horticulture circles in southeastern Iowa.” He received his B.S. in horticulture in 1975 and his M.S. in horticulture in 1982, both from Iowa State University.

Lawson excelled as the long-time manager of ISU’s only outlying research station focused on horticulture. Lawson annually conducted applied research trials on melons, sweet corn, tomatoes, pumpkins, peppers, and many other fruits and vegetables. Unlike most other research farms, Lawson was frequently the project leader, which meant he designed, conducted, analyzed, funded, and reported the experiments. He conducted more than 240 horticultural trials during his career.

As one ISU researcher stated: “We count on him, and he always delivers. His positive attitude is infectious, even in the heat and humidity of a Muscatine summer.”

Lawson served as editor and major author of the Muscatine Island Research and Demonstration Farm’s annual progress report (35 years) and newsletters (twice a year), which provided the latest information and research results of site-specific horticultural

and agricultural topics (approximately 330 individual, site-specific applied research articles). He was lead investigator on 75 percent of the reported projects. Lawson annually solicited seed, plants, products, and grants from 15 to 25 companies in support of research at the research farm. He expanded the farm’s land base and irrigation capabilities several times. He annually hosted tours and field days where visitors—from home gardeners to commercial farmers—could learn first-hand the latest in horticultural techniques.

Lawson was a key resource in the trend to produce local foods in Iowa. He led efforts to brand the “Muscatine Melon” in 1998. This was one of the earliest successes of local, place-based foods in Iowa. He organized a statewide asparagus research program that proved instrumental for successful production of asparagus in Iowa’s soils. He also was involved in the southeast Iowa research grape vineyard located at the ISU research farm near Crawfordsville. He frequently was called on for local expertise on a wide range of horticultural crops.

Lawson continually put forward new and innovative research applicable to southeast Iowa. For example, in 2008 he recruited and led a sugar beet project with Syngenta and a local group to research the potential of growing sugar beets in southeast Iowa for ethanol production. Also, although focusing on horticultural crops, Lawson recruited and conducted research on irrigation, soybeans, cover crops, soybean nematodes, and water quality. He continually kept the Muscatine Island Research and Demonstration Farm innovative and engaged with relevant topics.

Perhaps one of Lawson's greatest contributions was his impact on young people interested in horticulture and producing local foods. He employed more than 60 summer interns and workers since 1982, most of them students. These young people worked and learned applied horticultural skills with Lawson as a mentor. In aggregate, these student apprentices to Lawson represent a legacy of skills that will only magnify with time.

Jeff Iles, chair, ISU Horticulture Department stated: "It would be interesting and inspiring to assemble all of the faculty, staff, students, and growers who have been positively impacted, either directly or indirectly, by Vince Lawson over his long and productive career. Suffice it to say, the reception line would be long and each of the well-wishers would have a story or two to tell about Vince and how he helped them become better growers, horticulturists, and responsible stewards of the land."

Lawson's service has had an international impact, too. In 1985, he helped to organize a tour of the Muscatine Island Research Farm for a visiting delegation from China. A member of that delegation was 31-year-old Xi Jinping, who was impressed by the state of Iowa, Muscatine, and Iowa agriculture. In 2013, Xi Jinping became president of China. In 2012, Lawson visited China and also attended events and dinner when Xi visited Muscatine in 2012.

Lawson continually advanced his broad, yet in-depth horticultural knowledge, by leading extension programs and giving invited talks, locally and regionally. Growers have immense

respect for him because they know he communicates at a practical level that is immediately applicable to their farming operations. He also established a farm website for sharing the latest information. Most recently, Lawson was involved in training, developing, and mentoring a young assistant who received a M.S. degree from ISU while working at the Muscatine Island Research Farm. This individual now serves as one of two field extension horticulturists in Iowa.

Lawson was an innovator in applying sustainable farming practices such as cover crops. He used rye to retain soil nutrients in the sandy soil. Later, the rye served as a mini-windbreak between the rows to minimize blowing sand on young melon plants. It was an impressive use of cover crops in the flat, sandy fields near the Mississippi River. Recently, he used a rye cover crop as a successful part of producing organic pumpkins.

Lawson continually served as the secretary-treasurer of Muscatine Island Research Farm Association (MIRFA) for 35 years. The MIRFA owns the research farm and provides advice on research topics. Under Lawson, the association purchased the formerly rented farmland, plus additional acres, more than doubling the farm's size. He was the glue that kept this local association active and engaged. As he conducted cutting-edge, applied research, he answered horticultural questions and lived a public life of a focused, dedicated Iowa State University agriculturist in the Muscatine community.