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New Plant Pathologist at Cornell

by John Zakour



Christine (Chris) D. Smart has been named assistant professor of vegetable pathology at Cornell University.

GENEVA, NY: Christine (Chris) D. Smart has been named assistant professor of vegetable pathology at Cornell University. She will study diseases of vegetable crops in New York, and conduct research and extension in the plant pathology department at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva, NY. Previously, Smart was a visiting assistant professor in the plant pathology department at Cornell on the Ithaca campus. She started full time in Geneva on March 1, 2003.

"Chris has a tremendous background in plant pathology that will allow her to develop and carry out excellent research and extension programs," said Tom Burr, chairman of the plant pathology department in Geneva. "She has conducted research on diverse pathogen types and has the rare ability to do cutting-edge genomics research as well as having an in-depth understanding of field pathology. Last semester she did an outstanding job of teaching the introductory plant pathology course in the Ithaca department. We are certainly fortunate to have her in our department."

Burr said the position was the most important one to fill because the department realized that the vegetable industry in New York is growing in value, while faculty working on vegetables had declined significantly in Geneva.

Smart researches the molecular basis of host-pathogen interactions involving *Phytophthora infestans* and the biology of oomycete plant pathogens. She is currently studying late blight of tomato and potato (late blight is the disease that caused the Irish potato famine), and will continue to study tomato late blight and other diseases of tomato. After assessing the needs of vegetable growers, she will develop new projects to address them. "One of my goals is to gain a better understanding of disease epidemics in the field which will lead to improved management practices," said Smart, adding that she is really looking forward to starting in this position.

Another of Smart's goals is to promote regional agriculture. "I hope my program will support regional ag through research, training graduate students and extension education," Smart said.

Smart said studying vegetable pathology was exactly what she wanted to do with her career. She first became interested in plant pathology while working on chestnut blight. She is intrigued by the interactions between plants and microbes, and amazed by the devastation that a disease epidemic can cause.

Smart received a B.S. in Biology in 1986, and a Ph.D. in Botany and Plant Pathology in 1992, all from

Michigan State University. She was a graduate research assistant for the department of Botany and Plant Pathology at Michigan State University from 1986 to 1992. While at Michigan State, in 1988, she received the William Fields Award for Excellence in Teaching. From 1992 to 1996, Smart was a postdoctoral research associate for the department of plant pathology at the University of California-Davis. She became active in the Cornell community in 1996, when she became a postdoctoral research associate with plant pathologist William E. Fry, in Ithaca. She became a visiting professor in 2001. While at Cornell, Smart has been a co-investigator on a USDA National Research Initiative-Competitive grant for the role of oospores in the epidemiology of *Phytophthora infestans*. She was also the PI on a USDA National Research Initiative-Competitive grant to study resistance in tomatoes to *Phytophthora infestans*. Smart has authored or co-authored numerous publications since 1993.

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