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Cornell Graduate Student Receives 2008 Gilmer Award

By Joe Ogrodnick

(Left to right) Nathaniel Mitkowski, Craig Austin and Wayne Wilcox

Geneva, N.Y.: The 2008 Robert M. Gilmer Award was recently presented to Craig Austin, a PhD student in the Department of Plant Pathology and Plant-Microbe Biology at Cornell University's New York State Agricultural Experiment Station. The $5,000 award, funded from an endowment that Gilmer bequeathed to Cornell, is presented annually for excellence in research, academics and service to the department.

Robert Gilmer was a faculty member in Plant Pathology from 1950 to 1975 and served as department chair from 1967 to 1972. He was known internationally for his research on virus diseases of deciduous tree fruits and grapes. Some of his major research contributions included the determination that sour-cherry yellows is a virus complex transmitted by pollen and that X disease of stone fruits is vectored by several leafhopper species. He also discovered that tobacco ringspot virus is widespread on grapes in New York and Canada. His efforts led to the institution of a grape virus certification program in New York.

Gilmer Award recipients receive up to $1,000 to support presentation of their work at a scientific meeting or to support research at a collaborating institution. The remainder of the money is used to support the student's research. Austin was also presented a framed certificate commemorating the event and his name was inscribed on a plaque, which is on permanent display in the Plant Pathology seminar room.

"I am very pleased that Craig received this award-I believe that he is extremely deserving of this honor," said Wayne Wilcox, Austin's major professor. "His thesis research has quantified and mechanistically explained one of those phenomena that has long been known but never been systematically examined, i.e., the reduced development of powdery mildew on grapevine tissues that receive good sun exposure relative to those deprived of it by shade or clouds."

Wilcox pointed out that because powdery mildew is an annual threat to grapevines wherever they are grown, Austin's results will have international significance not only for the scientific community, but in a very practical sense for grape growers and their advisors as they design disease management programs. "I have already used his results in numerous extension talks and newsletters, and Craig has been invited to make his own presentations to the American Wine Society and the students and faculty at Ohio State University in addition to those that he has made at professional society meetings," said Wilcox. "I'm not at all surprised by his success to date-it's a real pleasure to have him in the program."

"I feel truly honored to have received this award," said Austin. "The reputation this department has earned over its long history motivates me every day to do my best to continue in the traditions expected of someone in my position. Occasions like the Gilmer Award presentation bring to mind our predecessors and the beginning of the modern age of plant pathology. Dr. Robert M. Gilmer was an outstanding pathologist, mentor and leader not only for the Experiment Station, but for the collective scientific community. To receive this award and to be associated with Dr. Gilmer and the department that he helped build is one of the proudest moments in my career."

Following the presentation of the Gilmer Award, Nathaniel Mitkowski, himself a former graduate student in the department, gave the Robert M. Gilmer Memorial Seminar entitled: Perspectives on Applied Turfgrass Pathology. Mitkowski received his PhD from Cornell in 1991 and is currently Associate Professor of Plant Pathology at the University of Rhode Island.

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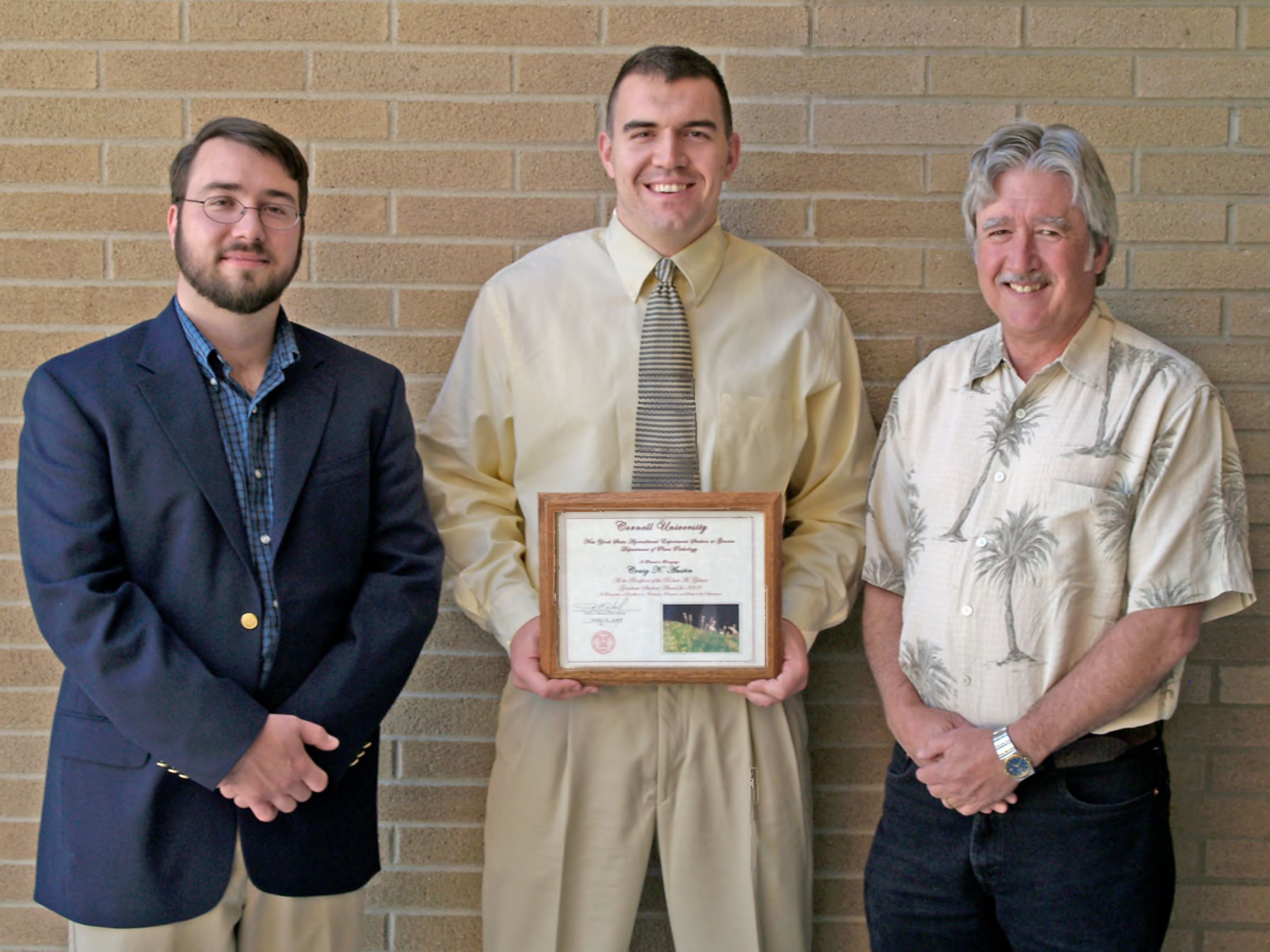
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