

John George Seeley

December 21, 1915 — May 9, 2007

Professor Emeritus John George Seeley was born in North Bergen, New Jersey on December 21, 1915. He graduated from the Robert Fulton Grammar School, North Bergen, New Jersey in 1929 and Memorial High School, West New York, New Jersey in 1933.

As a child, he started his life-long interest in plants. His goal, when he started college, was to become a greenhouse carnation grower. Fortunately, for us, that changed, not his interest in plants, but his avocation. We have all, students, faculty, friends and the floricultural industry, benefited from his love, interest, knowledge and dedication to plant growing. John used this interest in all of his life's activities, from raising his children, to his professional avocation as a teacher and his deep involvement with Rotary.

In 1937, John received his undergraduate education at Rutgers University and graduated with a B.S. degree majoring in Floriculture. While an undergraduate student, he was elected to Alpha Zeta (National Agriculture Honorary Society) and awarded by that society "Best Senior in the College of Agriculture." John found his real love for teaching and research during his years at Rutgers and knew he required more training. He studied for his M.S. degree at Rutgers under Professor O. Wesley Davidson, a noted floriculturist and received his degree in 1940. He was superintendent of the ornamental horticulture gardens at the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station during 1940-41.

He matriculated at Cornell in 1941 as an Instructor to teach floriculture. In 1941, he left for a research position in South Carolina with the USDA, as part of the WWII effort, to study growth and extraction of rubber from field grown goldenrod. In 1944, he was a chemist in the Rubber Materials Laboratory of the Wright Aeronautical Corporation in Paterson, New Jersey.

In 1945, he returned to Cornell as an Instructor to continue his graduate studies under Professor Kenneth Post, who, at the time, was one of the world's leading researchers in the field of floriculture. The floriculture industry in the United States was changing and expanding rapidly. Post's research was a major factor in these changes and expansion.

John received his Ph.D. degree in 1948 and was appointed Assistant Professor in the Department of Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture at Cornell University. In 1949, he was appointed at Pennsylvania State University as Associate Professor of Floriculture in the Department of Horticulture and ultimately Professor and Chairman

of the Floriculture Section. He was instrumental in creating a very active floriculture program, organizing the commercial floriculture industry in the state, beginning the Pennsylvania Flower Growers organization and publishing a monthly bulletin. He organized his colleagues in Plant Pathology, Entomology, Agricultural Economics and Agriculture Engineering to work together for the benefit of the commercial floriculture industry in the state. They created active teaching, research and extension programs.

Professor Kenneth Post, at Cornell, died suddenly in October of 1955, just after he was appointed department head. John was recruited to return to Cornell to take on the headship of the department. His tenure as head was historically significant for the Department of Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture. Tremendous growth in the “Green Industries” (a phrase that evolved from the floriculture, nursery, landscape and turfgrass industries to describe them in total) was occurring. These industries enjoyed strong relationships with the Department, College and New York State government. John understood these dynamics and thus laid the foundation for many changes in departmental programs to better serve the changing needs of these industries. As an example, undergraduate education in landscape architecture, that had a long and significant history at Cornell, had disappeared. However, landscape instruction continued in the Department of Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture. There were only two faculty teaching the courses included in the landscape curriculum for a rapidly expanding undergraduate enrollment. Furthermore, landscape audiences in the state that fully supported the Department landscape program, constructively urged that landscape design move toward accreditation as a Landscape Architecture Program. Under John’s leadership, the decision to move forward was begun with the hiring of a third faculty member who had the credentials to move the program towards accreditation. Today, Landscape Architecture (which has an accredited undergraduate program for over thirty years) is an independent department in the College and has a very close relationship with the graduate Landscape Architecture program located in the College of Architecture, Art and Planning. Collectively, these programs enjoy a national and international reputation for excellence.

Another example of change initiated under John’s leadership was associated with the need to bolster faculty support for the rapidly growing turfgrass industry in New York State. For almost thirty years, turfgrass science was someone’s part-time faculty assignment in the Department of Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture. Under John’s leadership, the first full-time faculty position in turfgrass science was created and filled. Today, the turfgrass industry is supported by two faculty positions that interact with an interdepartmental team of turfgrass scientists from other departments and programs to field an outstanding program that enjoys tremendous moral and financial support from the turfgrass industry. Like Landscape Architecture, the Turfgrass Program enjoys a national reputation for excellence.

In addition to the “Green Industries,” John was also committed to youth and consumer education in floriculture and ornamental horticulture. John worked with the Department of Education at Cornell and the New York State Department of Education to get an appreciation of flowers incorporated into elementary school curricula. He also actively supported a full-time 4-H Youth position in the department that functioned to deliver floriculture and ornamental horticulture information and training to the extensive 4-H Cornell Cooperative Extension network in New York State. As head, John enthusiastically supported two Cooperative Extension positions that directed information to adult consumer audiences in the state. One channeled a program through the College of Human Ecology; the other through the traditional agricultural, county-based Cornell Cooperative Extension System associated with the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. John was very proud of what these positions accomplished and followed their progress with great interest.

John was instrumental in organizing the Kenneth Post Foundation in 1957 after Professor Post’s death and served as secretary until his retirement in 1983. Monies for the endowment came from members of the floriculture industry. They collected over \$100,000, which was a very large sum in 1957. Interest from the endowment is still allocated to various research projects, selected by Kenneth Post Foundation board members.

John worked with the New York City Florists Club for many years, organizing programs and maintaining close liaison between the Department and Club members. At the demise of the Club in 1990, John was instrumental in having the Club donate its’ treasury to The Gloeckner Foundation (a philanthropic floriculture granting foundation), of which he was president.

John was active with the American Society of Florists, the national society for the floriculture industry. He served on numerous committees and was particularly active in one associated with “Grades and Standards for Cut Flowers and Potted Plants.” This committee and the society tried to convince the industry, including growers and retailers to have standards for their products on a year round basis. The arguments were very logical, but they were unsuccessful in establishing standards, which, by the way, are still not established today. John was elected to the American Society of Florists’ Hall of Fame in 1979.

Professor Seeley was active in the American Society for Horticultural Science. A national organization started in 1903 by a group of horticulturists that included Liberty Hyde Bailey. John a long time member of 68 years, was elected a Fellow of the Society in 1970, served on numerous committees and in 1981 was elected president. He also was active in the International Society for Horticultural Science, headquartered in the Netherlands. He was the

United States representative to the Section for Ornamental Plants from 1962-86, served as secretary from 1962-64 and chairman from 1964-70 and again from 1982-86.

In 1984-85, John was awarded the D.C. Kiplinger Chair in Floriculture by Ohio State University. This was a high point of John's career. This was a period of time when he was not under stress and could completely emerge himself in floriculture activities including teaching, research and extension. Colleagues at Ohio State still talk about the enjoyable, productive time they had working with John during that year.

John joined the board of the Gloeckner Foundation in 1970. This organization had a large endowment and granted monies each year to support floricultural research. In 1986, he became president, after the benefactor Fred Gloeckner died. John was particularly helpful to young assistant professors getting started. He advised and encouraged them on ways to improve their applications to obtain their grants. Many floriculture faculty in the U.S. still talk appreciatively about the help John contributed to their careers.

His interest in Rotary International was life long. He joined the Ithaca Rotary Club in 1957, rose to club president and became governor of District 7071 in 1973-74. District 7071 included about 50 clubs in central New York State. Part of his responsibility as governor was to visit each club during his one-year tenure. The theme of his talk to the Rotary clubs was "The Phenomena of Photoperiodism." John grew plants to demonstrate the phenomena and took them to these meetings. He related the phenomena to Rotaries' goals of service to mankind.

Honorary societies he was elected to include: Sigma Xi, Alpha Zeta, Phi Kappa Phi, Phi Epsilon Phi, Epsilon Sigma Phi, and Phi Alpha Xi. He received a Silver Medal from the Massachusetts Horticulture Society in 1980 and the Carl Bittner Extension Award from the American Society of Horticultural Science in 1982.

John met Catherine Cook, while he was a student at Rutgers and she a student at New Jersey College for Women (NJC). They married in 1938 and had five children. He was pleased all his children achieved their Bachelor's degrees and two, Daniel and Thomas, continued their studies to earn Ph.D. degrees. Thomas is presently Professor and Chairman of the Department of Neurobiology and Behavior at Cornell. John and Catherine were married for 61 years prior to Catherine's death in 1999. His son, David, passed away in 1995. John is survived by his daughter, Catherine Anne, of Ithaca, New York; and sons, Daniel, of Holliston, Massachusetts; George, of Cooperstown, New York; Thomas, of Ithaca, New York and 14 grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

In 1986, his colleagues in the Department of Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture and Department of Plant Pathology organized the "Seeley Conference," where invited (100 limit) leaders of the floriculture industry of the

world came to Cornell for four days to a “think tank” analysis of major problems/changes facing their industry. This was an opportunity for intellectual exchange of ideas and thoughts among the participants, a unique innovative conference that was a great success. It has continued on an annual basis. The original conference board consisted of Cornellians, who during the initial years underwrote many of the expenses. Today’s board members aren’t necessarily Cornellians and the conference is self-supporting. This past June was the 21st conference and honored John.

John had a long and productive life; his accomplishments were many. He touched and improved the lives of many people, including hundreds of students. We are all pleased to have had the opportunity to know and work with him.

Robert Langhans, Chair; George Good, Ken Horst