Saskatchewan fruit breeders awarded A.P. Stevenson Commemorative Award by the Manitoba Horticultural Association

Hugh Skinner, MHA President

The Stevenson Memorial Committee is pleased to announce a joint presentation of the 2019 award of the A.P. Stevenson Commemorative Award to Dr. Bob Bors and Rick Sawatzky of the University of Saskatchewan. Dr. Bors and Mr. Sawatzky have managed the fruit development program at the University of Saskatchewan which has resulted in the introduction of 2 apple cultivars, 5 sour cherry cultivars, 10 haskap cultivars. The joint presentation recognizes the collaboration of these two individuals to develop, select, introduce and promote these fruits for prairie gardeners and fruit producers. Rick Sawatzky, as technician in the Horticulture Department at the University, preserved genetic material and carried out crosses of sour cherry material. When Dr. Bors came to the University of Saskatchewan in 1999, his excitement with regard to the potential of the sour cherry selections led to introduction and promotion of the Romance series of cherries. His persistence in promoting these hardy cherries through talks and demonstrations has paid off and they are now widely grown by home gardeners and fruit growers on the prairies.

In 1997 Rick ordered 4 cultivars of haskaps (known then as honeyberries) from Oregon. These four cultivars were selected from material collected in Russian botanical gardens. In 2000 Bob tasted fruit from these bushes on a plot tour and became excited. A short time later Bob met Dr. Maxine Thompson who was breeding haskaps at the University of Oregon. (It was Dr. Thompson who adopted the name "haskap" from the name used by the Ainu people of Hokaido, Japan, the first people to cultivate this fruit). They embarked on a program to breed and select cultivars of this new fruit and have developed a world renowned collection of genetic material and selections. These highly superior selections are becoming widely grown on the prairies.

In addition to breeding sour cherries and haskaps, work continues at the University of Saskatchewan to develop and introduce apples and pears. The collaboration between Rick Sawatzky and Dr. Bob Bors has brought new high quality fruit cultivars to prairie gardeners and fruit producers. The impact of this work will continue into the future and will have an impact beyond prairie Canada. We salute Rick and Bob for these important developments and thank them for their persistence in bringing these fruits to prairie gardeners.

Presentation of the award at the Annual General Meeting of the Manitoba Horticultural Association in Carman, MB on February 1, 2019.

Dr. Wilbert Ronald, Hugh Skinner, Connie Lagerquist, Rick Sawatzky, Dr. Bob Bors, Dr. Philip Ronald
Photo courtesy of Edwin Pritchard
University of Saskatchewan fruit breeders receive award

Sara Williams

Bob Bors and Rick Sawatzky, fruit breeders with the Department of Plant Sciences, University of Saskatchewan, are the joint recipients of the prestigious A.P. Stevenson Commemorative Award for their development of sour cherries and haskaps.

Inaugurated by the Manitoba Horticultural Association in 1932, it honours individuals who have "made a conspicuous achievement in the field of practical horticulture." Named in memory of A. P. Stevenson, a pioneer Manitoba horticulturist who arrived from Scotland in 1874, it has been given only 22 times in 83 years.

As gardeners, we seldom give much thought to their origins as we eat haskaps fresh off the bush or take a cherry pie out of the oven. But it took more than 50 years of breeding and selection work at the University of Saskatchewan before you planted your prairie-hardy cherries and over 20 intensive years went into the development of those haskaps.

Sour Cherries

The first sour cherries planted in the University experimental plots were from seeds from the Central Siberian Botanic Garden in Novosibirsk. These were just beginning to fruit when Rick began work as a technician in 1971. They had low productivity and lacked winter hardiness. Asked to discard them, Rick took two home which he tried (unsuccessfully) to cross with sweet cherries. His goal: to develop a hardy large shrub with large, high quality fruit.

Rick's next crosses involved a collection of sour cherries, mainly from Europe, received from Les Kerr (who had worked on them for at least 20 years). All these were controlled crosses made in the greenhouse with help from Rick's kids on weekends. "It was a great botany lesson for them."

Rick crossed the best of these, 'Kerr's Easy Pick', with 'North Star', a sour cherry tree introduced from Minnesota. The result was 'SK Carmine Jewel', the first sour cherry introduced by the University of Saskatchewan in 1999.

Bob arrived at the University of Saskatchewan in 1999 when a new generation of Rick’s seedlings were coming into production. He tasted them, began taking data and thought, “These cherries are exciting!” Bob jokingly says, “Rick was their Dad and I became their Godfather.”

Bob tested them further, selected the best and developed a protocol for their tissue culture propagation. He gathered additional cherries from local growers and from Ontario and made more crosses. When making selections he looked at flavour, size, pitting ease and the possibility of mechanical harvesting.

Bob introduced the Romance series of cherries in 2003: 'Crimson Passion', 'Cupid', 'Juliet', 'Romeo' and 'Valentine.' Of these, Rick's favourite is still 'Carmine Jewel' while Bob's are 'Romeo' and 'Juliette'.

Rick's advice on the care of sour cherries: "Grow them as a shrub with multiple stems rather than in tree form." Bob concurs and adds: "Keep the soil around cherries weed-free."

Haskaps

Haskaps have gone through many incarnations in terms of their names. They've been called blue honeysuckle, sweetberry honeysuckle, and honeyberries. The earliest Canadian selections were made by George Bugnet, a French novelist and early plant breeder who homesteaded west of Legal, Alberta in 1905 and who is better known for his roses. Bugnet's honeysuckles were a beginning, but their taste, size and texture left much to be desired.

Breeding at the University of Saskatchewan began soon after Rick Sawatzky came across what were then called honeyberries (Lonicera caerulea edulis) in 1997 in an article by Jim Gilbert in a Minnesota fruit magazine, Berryland News in 1997. He ordered 2 each of 4 honeyberry cultivars from a nursery in Oregon.

Rick was in the preliminary testing mode when Bob Bors joined the Department and tasted them in the summer of 2000 when he and Rick were giving a field tour to growers. It was June and they were already ripe. Both Bob and the growers became very excited. (Bob has yet to calm down).

The following year crosses were made among the four varieties. By 2003, thirty-three named Russian haskaps had been obtained from multiple sources. In 2004, Bob heard a talk on haskaps by Dr. Maxine Thompson at a conference. He visited her breeding program and she gave him many seeds and cuttings of Japanese haskaps to use in his breeding. That was a double whammy. Haskaps had him. Over the next decade, Bob made trips to Japan, Poland, and across Canada gathering an enormous collection of wild and cultivated haskaps. As well, he continued to obtain seed from various sources, especially Russia.
Maxine Thompson had referred to them as haskaps: the phonetic spelling of the word used by the Ainu people who settled Hokkaido, Japan in the 13th century and the world’s oldest name for this berry. Bob followed her nomenclature and haskaps they’ve become.

“We had stock from Dr. Thompson from Oregon State University and from Japan as well as seeds from Russia. Once they were in the plots I selected what was worth crossing. There were many from which to choose and they ripened at different times.”

Among the early and mid-season haskaps released in 2007 were ‘Borealis’, ‘Tundra’ and the Indigo series (‘Indigo Gem’, ‘Indigo Treat’ and ‘Indigo Yum’). ‘Aurora’ and ‘Honey Bee’ followed in 2011. Later ripening haskap releases were ‘Boreal Beauty’ and ‘Boreal Blizzard’ in 2014 and ‘Boreal Beast’ in 2016. Of these, Bob’s favourite are ‘Aurora’ and the Boreal series.

Marketing

The next step was introducing the new dwarf sour cherries (and later the haskaps) to commercial fruit growers and the nursery trades. Thousands of open-pollinated plants were sold through Western Producer ads and dozens of clonally propagated selections were distributed free to carefully chosen co-operators.

Bob became the consummate marketer and publicist of both cherries and haskaps, writing a growers manual (with Linda Matthews), giving many talks and courses, leading plot tours, posting articles on the Fruit Program’s web site (www.fruit.usask.ca) which gets 2 million hits per year, and taking cherries and haskaps with him for folks to taste wherever he went. Once people became aware of their existence, both fruits became very popular.

Haskap research has been funded through five Saskatchewan Agriculture grants spanning 13 years. Over the last five years (2013-2018), 75% of the program funding has come from plant patent royalties derived from their introductions. Plant sales directly to the public, held annually in early June since 2005, workshop registration fees and cherry and haskap cookbook sales have also funded their research.

Parting Thoughts

Bob wishes other breeding programs would replicate the University of Saskatchewan's style. "Many of them still operate in a traditional manner – they exclude the general public. We’re the opposite. We welcome the so-called “backyard gardener”, hand out materials, and have an annual plant sale. Grassroots connections with the general public are crucial and should not be underestimated”.

Rick feels his greatest accomplishment was simply keeping the fruit program going at times when few others in the Department were interested. He loved his work on fruit during the 47 years he was with the University and that love continues into his retirement. He believes good apples and great pears are only one generation away.

Bob’s greatest accomplishment has been "the expansion of the haskap program. We took something that did not exist and brought it forward to the point where the University of Saskatchewan has the world’s best haskap breeding program. Our haskaps taste better, ripen later and stay on the bush longer before falling off. As well, we were the first to use mechanical harvesters. We have given birth to a whole new industry.”

As well as the cherry and haskap breeding, we have continued to breed and maintain a diverse collection of over a dozen far north fruit crops in what we call the “Prairie Fruit Gene bank”.

Sara Williams is the author of many books including Gardening Naturally with Hugh Skinner, Creating the Prairie Xeriscape, and with Bob Bors, Growing Fruit in Northern Gardens. She continues to give workshops on a wide range of gardening topics throughout the prairies.
The Stevenson Memorial Gold Medal was instituted in memory of the late Alexander Patterson Stevenson (1854-1922) of Pine Grove Nursery, Morden, Manitoba. This stalwart Scotsman arrived here in 1874 from his native Perthshire and planted his first apple tree.

Mr. Stevenson began his horticultural experiments by trying to acclimatize trees from the British Isles, Eastern Canada and the Northern States. However, he found it more satisfactory to introduce plant material from Russia, as it seemed to perform better under Manitoba’s rigorous climate. Many of his early introductions are still in use as breeding material, and many of our present day varieties have some of the blood of Stevenson’s introductions. The ‘Pine Grove Red’ apple and the ‘Manitoba’ plum are two of his important introductions.

For many years, Pine Grove Nursery was a mecca for farmers who wanted to buy and pick fruit, or for interested people to visit, where one could see Manitoba apples growing. At one time there were over a thousand trees in the nursery, and over four hundred of these bearing fruit. Mr. Stevenson’s outstanding work with fruit trees in the early part of the century won him the popular title “Apple King of Manitoba”.

One of the outstanding contributions of the late Mr. Stevenson was to demonstrate that farming was a “way of life”. He followed sound agricultural practices, and believed that the land should be handed on to succeeding generations in a better state then when received.

For many years, Mr. Stevenson was a very familiar and welcome figure on prairie farmsteads. As an employee of the Forest Nursery Station at Indian Head, Saskatchewan, Mr. Stevenson travelled over the prairies encouraging farmers to plant shelterbelts. Due to energetic encouragement in tree planting, many prairie farmsteads can boast orchards and ornamentals plantings which otherwise could not survive prairie extremes of climate.

As well as a memorial to this great Prairie Horticulturalist, the “A.P. Stevenson Commemorative Award” (formerly the Stevenson Memorial Gold Medal) also honours individuals who have made “conspicuous achievement in the field of practical horticulture”. Individuals so honoured, have all contributed greatly to the list of varieties of vegetables, fruit, and ornamentals now in use. We owe these recipients a great debt for their worthwhile efforts. Much of our present day horticulture information is the result of their vision, skill and patience.

The Stevenson Memorial Gold Medal was presented until 1970 when it was replaced with a presentation of a work of fine art. Since that time the award has been known as the A.P. Stevenson commemorative Award.

**History**

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**Award Recipients 1932 to 1944**

May 24, 1932 - Dr. Frank L. Skinner, Dropmore, MB, Presented at Pine Grove Nursery, Morden

August 25, 1935 - Dr. N.E. Hansen, Brookings SD, Presented at the Dominion Experimental Station, Morden

June 3, 1938 - George F. Chipman, Winnipeg, MB, Presented posthumously at Chipman Fruit Farm, Charleswood

February 13, 1941 - N.M. Ross, Indian Head, SK, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

November 9, 1944 - Prof. W.H. Alderman, University of Minnesota, Presented at Western Canadian Society for Horticulture Convention, Winnipeg
Award Recipients cont’d... 1947 to present

August 25, 1947 - Wm. Godfrey, Morden, MB, Presented at Great Plains Horticultural Convention, Morden

February 15, 1951 - M.B. Davis, Ottawa ON, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

February 18, 1954 - Dr. A.F. Yeager, New Hampshire, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

February 12, 1958 - Dr. W.R. Leslie, Winnipeg, MB, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

February 11, 1960 - Robert Simonet, Edmonton, AB, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

February 14, 1963 - A.J. Porter, Parkside, SK, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

February 9, 1967 - Dr. C. Walkof, Morden, MB, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

February 13, 1970 - W.L. “Les” Kerr, Saskatoon, SK, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

February 8, 1974 - Dr. W.A. Cumming, Morden, MB, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

February 1978 - Prof. John Walker, Winnipeg, MB, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

February 8, 1980 - H.F. “Bert” Harp, Victoria, BC, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

February 3, 1984 - John A. Wallace, Beaverlodge, AB, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Winnipeg

February 3, 1989 - Dr. H.H. Marshall, Morden, MB, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Brandon

February 8, 2002 - Dr. Wilbert G. Ronald, Portage la Prairie, MB, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Steinbach

February 2, 2007 - Dr. Dale Herman, North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Dauphin

January 29, 2010 - Prof. Louis Lenz, Winnipeg, MB, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Steinbach

January 30, 2015 - Lynn Collicutt, Sydney BC, formerly of Winnipeg, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association Convention, Charleswood

February 1, 2019 - Dr. Bob Bors & Rick Sawatzky, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Presented at Manitoba Horticultural Association 121st Convention, Carman
Manitoba Horticultural Association

Stevenson Memorial Board

The A.P. Stevenson Commemorative Award, the highest award the Manitoba Horticultural Association can confer on an individual is presented to a person who has made a conspicuous achievement in the field of practical horticulture through the origination, introduction or propagation of horticultural specimen products which make a distinct contribution to horticulture in Manitoba. It is presented in memory of A. P. Stevenson, a pioneer Manitoba horticulturist who arrived from Scotland in 1874. Since its inception 24 individuals have been honoured as recipients of the award.

The Stevenson Memorial Board, a standing committee of the Manitoba Horticultural Association is made up of:

Chairperson: President of the Manitoba Horticultural Association.
Three members of the Manitoba Horticultural Association.
Three people appointed by the Manitoba Horticultural Association
Secretary/Treasurer of the Manitoba Horticultural Association.

Nominations

Nominations for the award may be submitted to:

Stevenson Memorial Board
135 Thom Avenue East
Winnipeg, MB R2C 1A2

The nomination should be accompanied by full details of the nominee’s conspicuous achievement in the field of horticulture through the origination, introduction, or propagation of horticultural species or products, which make a distinct contribution to horticulture in Manitoba.

Donations

Donations may be made to the Stevenson Memorial Board Fund, by cheque to the above address, thank you

2019 Committee

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