

Posted on Tue, Nov. 28, 2006

Carl Campbell, 77, Florida professor was 'giant' in the tropical fruit industry

By Georgia Tasker

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Carl Campbell, who championed mangoes in South Florida for 50 years, died Saturday at his home. He was 77.

Campbell was a professor emeritus of the University of Florida's Tropical Research and Education Center in the Redland and had been a tropical fruit consultant in 22 countries.

"I would say Carl was instrumental in the development of the international mango industry in this hemisphere," said Jonathan Crane, a tropical fruit crops specialist at the center who considered Campbell a mentor.

"His research and extension work with all the other tropical fruit -- avocado, carambola, litchi, longan and mamey sapote -- is very well known internationally," Crane said. "And he was certainly instrumental in the Florida tropical fruit industry."

Campbell was a professor at the research center from 1960 to 1988. After retiring from active research work, he traveled throughout the tropical world, including China. He taught tropical fruit courses in Spanish to growers in Central and South America and Spain.

"My father was completely constant in his moral compass and truth," said his son Richard, now senior curator of the tropical fruit program at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden. "This was the key to him in the tropical fruit world and as a father. You always knew where you stood. There was never any question: You knew right from wrong and you didn't do wrong, you did right."

Mike Maunder, director of Fairchild, said, "Carl was one of the giants in tropical horticulture and particularly tropical fruit production. And he had the good humor and expertise that comes from a life well lived. We'll miss him enormously."

Craig Campbell also was influenced by his father to go into agricultural research work, he said. Not only was his father "a very talented botanist who knew all the Latin names of the trees in the woods and tropical fruit," he was a family-focused man who took his children camping, fishing, canoeing and hunting for arrowheads in the Midwest, Craig said.

"My dad was so knowledgeable about so many things, and he was so generous about sharing his knowledge," said his daughter Nan. "Now, I can't pick up the phone and say to him, 'I saw this bird; do you know what it is?'"

This year, to his immense satisfaction, Carl Campbell received an honorary doctorate from his undergraduate alma mater, Blackburn College in Carlinville, Ill. He had earned his doctorate in biochemistry and botany from Purdue University in 1957.

In 1958, Campbell created the first educational display of mango cultivars for the Mango Forum, a group of growers and scientists. He continued that annual display, which was adopted for the International Mango Festival by his son Richard.

Campbell was eating dinner when he slowly lowered his head and died, said Becky Campbell, his wife of 55 years.

"This was hard for me, but I clearly didn't want him in the hospital and suffering for years," she said. "I'm happier it was this way."

Campbell also is survived by daughter Lori, son Rob, six grandchildren, brother Richard of Paris, Mo., and sister Hilda Dow of Harbert, Mich.

A memorial service is scheduled for 11 a.m. Dec. 8 at UF's Tropical Research and Education Center, 18950 SW 280th St. in the Redland. For more information, call 305-246-7001.