A Year of Celebration and Commitment

By Beverly R. Durgan*

In 2010 the Department of Agronomy and Plant Genetics celebrated 100 years of improving plants and the lives of people. The official festivities included two excellent seminars and a centennial day in late August, with tours and alumni gatherings that brought many people associated with the department: some as faculty, some as students, some as growers of plant varieties it has developed. I am proud to be a faculty member in the Department of Agronomy and Plant Genetics. The celebration was a good time to look back at where we have been and to think about what the next 100 years may bring.

The University of Minnesota’s plant variety programs have a long history of helping farmers with plant genetics. That history traces back to hard red spring wheat varieties released by the University of Minnesota in the late 1890s, nearly 20 years before the department was formally organized.

Looking back through those years reveals that the pioneers in agronomy and plant genetics overcame many challenges resembling those we face today – tight money, new technology, food supply issues, societal changes and structural changes in agriculture. They overcame those challenges with grit, determination and a steady focus on finding the agronomic and genetic solutions that perform in Minnesota fields, help to build Minnesota’s economy, and contribute to Minnesotans’ quality of life.

While plant-breeding techniques, genetic knowledge and farming practices have changed much since the early days, the department’s three basic goals – discovering new knowledge about plant breeding and plant genetics, educating graduate and undergraduate students, and developing plant germplasm, genetic stocks and varieties – remain unchanged. The need for a plant breeding and genetics program focused on those goals is as strong today as it was 100 years ago.

An important lesson from history is the importance of teamwork and partnerships. History has many examples of farmers, farm organizations, the University of Minnesota and state and federal agencies working to improve Minnesota agriculture. Those partnerships produced answers for the challenges Minnesota agriculture faced in the past; they will again in the future.

The varietal trials results in this booklet are part of a large University of Minnesota commitment, both to providing answers growers need for making decisions today and to long-term research to prepare for the challenges that will come in the future.

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