In memoriam

Claude Earle Thomas, Plant Pathologist (1940-2021)

Claude E. Thomas, a retired research plant pathologist with the Agricultural Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, died on December 15, 2021, near his home in Charleston, SC. He was 81.

Thomas was born in Spartanburg, SC, on December 4, 1940. Following graduation from Spartanburg High School, Thomas enrolled at nearby Wofford College, where he received his B.S. degree in 1962. From 1962 to 1966, he was a Graduate Fellow in a newly established plant pathology Ph.D. program at Clemson University. Thomas received his M.S. degree in 1964 and his Ph.D. degree in 1966. He was Clemson University's very first recipient of a Ph.D. degree in plant pathology.

Thomas started his professional career in 1966 by accepting a job as a Research Plant Pathologist with the Agricultural Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture in Weslaco, Texas. He spent the first 16 years of his career at a USDA research facility co-located with the Texas A&M University agricultural research station at Weslaco. After about 15 years of living in Texas, Thomas and wife June had a budding family and they developed a desire to move back to their home state of South Carolina. In 1982, the Agency approved a request to transfer Thomas and his research program to the USDA/ARS vegetable crops research laboratory in Charleston, SC. In 1990, the Laboratory Director position at the Charleston location became vacant, and Thomas applied for and was appointed Supervisory Research Plant Pathologist and Laboratory Director, U.S. Vegetable Laboratory, Charleston, SC. Claude's tenure in this position lasted 14 years. During this period, the laboratory thrived under his direction and was widely recognized as one of the Agency's most productive and well managed locations. Thomas spent his entire 38-year career working as a USDA scientist.

Thomas developed an international reputation as the leading authority on fungal pathogens of cucurbit crops, especially the melon. He was instrumental in identifying sources of genetic resistances, in determining the inheritances of the resistances, in the identification of pathogen strains, in the development of methodologies to identify and differentiate pathogen strains, in cooperating with efforts to develop molecular markers and map the location of resistance genes on genetic maps, and in developing new breeding lines and varieties exhibiting high levels of resistances. One of Thomas' most recognized achievements was the development and release of the melon breeding line MR-1 (MR meaning "multiple resistance"). MR-1 is resistant to the major melon diseases powdery mildew, downy mildew, Fusarium wilt, and Alternaria leaf blight. MR-1 has been used by numerous melon breeders worldwide to breed disease resistant varieties.

Several other accomplishments need to be mentioned that document Thomas' recognition as a leader in his chosen field of endeavor: 1) he was the organizer and chairperson of the 1989 North American Cucurbitaceae Conference held in Charleston, SC; 2) he was a former president of the Southern Division, American Phytopathology Society; and 3) he was an author of American Phytopathology Society's publication "Compendium of Cucurbit Diseases." This is a widely cited reference work with multiple editions as well as multiple printings.

Thomas was both a renowned research scientist and a consummate educator. He served two terms on the Weslaco, TX, School Board; served as a guest lecturer, Xinjiang Agricultural University, China (1988); completed research and advisory assignments in Peru, Israel, France, Poland, and China; and served on the adjunct graduate faculties of both Texas A&M University and Clemson University, advising and guiding research of M.S. and Ph.D. students. He authored/co-authored over 200 scientific research publications and was an elected member of the honor societies Phi Kappa Phi, Sigma Xi, and Gamma Sigma Delta.

The final act of Claude Thomas' professional career was the management of the design and construction of a 50,000 square foot office and laboratory facility in Charleston, SC, to house 14 USDA research scientists and 6 faculty members of the Clemson University Coastal Research and Education Center. USDA and Clemson University personnel moved into this new state-of-the-art research facility in March 2003. Claude had to delay his planned "early" retirement by 1 year to see the construction project to conclusion. Claude retired from the USDA in early 2004.

Claude Thomas was a devoted husband, loving father and grandfather, and a devout Christian who served as a deacon and church council member at Fort Johnson Baptist Church, Charleston, SC. He is survived by his wife of 61 years, June Oakman Thomas; three sons, Christopher, Andrew, and Matthew; one sister, Dorothy Calvert; three grandchildren; and one great-grandchild. Thomas was a lifelong sportsman who loved nothing more than to be hunting and fishing with his three sons and later his grandchildren. Upon retirement, he became President of Charleston Lowcountry Rose Society and enjoyed growing and exhibiting his championship roses.

(Submitted by Dr. Thomas' former colleague Richard L. Fery. Dr. Fery is a retired vegetable breeder in Charleston, SC.)

Figure 1. Plant pathologist Claude E. Thomas, 1940-2021.