

In memoriam

Robert Warren Barham, Plant Breeder (1953 – 2023)

Dr. Robert Warren Barham passed away on March 2, 2023, at the age of 69, leaving behind a legacy of extraordinary achievements and fond memories. With heavy hearts, we mourn the loss of a beloved father, brother, and friend, whose life touched everyone he encountered. Robert is survived by his children, Andy, Laura, Kelly, and Emily, as well as his seven grandchildren: Val, Atticus, Owen, Eleanor, Everett, Ramona, and June. He is also survived by his sisters and brothers in law, Barbara and Mari and Juanita and Max, as well as many nieces and nephews whom he loved greatly, and was predeceased by his sister Margaret Ann.

Robert was born the fourth child to Margaret and Dr. Warren Barham in Raleigh, North Carolina. Later in childhood he moved to Vacaville, California, where he spoke fondly of spending afternoons exploring nature on his own, teaching tennis, and playing trombone in the band. He earned his Bachelor of Science from UC Davis, and later his PhD in Genetics and Plant Breeding from the University of Minnesota. In his early years, he was introduced to the science and art of plant breeding at home with his father, who had both a personal and professional passion for plant breeding. Robert later went on to build his career as a second-generation plant breeder; he worked on many crops including radish, broccoli, onions, and watermelon.

Robert was a visionary plant breeder and a gifted entrepreneur. Robert and his father were partners in the plant breeding company, Barham Seeds Inc. They worked together breeding watermelons and saw success releasing some of the early triploid watermelon (seedless) varieties into the US marketplace, including 5244, Fandango, and UltraCool. They

also developed seeded watermelon varieties including Summer Flavor 800.

Later in his career, Robert would go on to work with his daughter, Laura Brown, and together they developed triploid watermelon varieties with their team at Enza Zaden Research, USA. He was instrumental in breeding and releasing the triploid hybrids Cracker Jack, Red Garnet, Red Amber, Red Opal, Rio Grande, and Minibee. The pipeline of germplasm he developed will continue his legacy into the future (Figure 1).

In his career he also worked on broccoli breeding. He developed heat tolerant broccoli and secured a utility patent on the heat tolerant trait. Robert was always very interested in seed production and developed seed production research projects in both broccoli and watermelon throughout his career.

His passion and dedication inspired his colleagues and collaborators alike. Through his unique plant breeding insights, he made the world a better place, leaving a distinctive legacy. Robert's brilliance, creativity, and unyielding spirit were evident not only in his work but also in his life. He cherished every moment, living with urgency and passion, and considered his family to be his brightest legacy.

A natural performer, Robert was always quick with a joke, a song, a lesson, or advice. We remember him as a wholly unique individual who loved spending time with family, swimming (not to mention waterslides!), music, and nature. His favorite place was among the redwoods of California, where he found peace and serenity. His spirit will always be at home in those majestic trees.

Submitted by Laura Brown, Enza Zaden Research



Figure 1. Robert Barham harvesting watermelon in field plots in Gilroy, California and Myakka, Florida, U.S.A. (Photos contributed by Laura Brown)