

On Solid Ground – Plant Health, Teaching with Plants – Jan. 30, 2013

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Cook Launches Plant Health International



James Cook, former dean of the WSU College of Agricultural, Human, and Natural Resource Sciences and emeritus professor of plant pathology and crop and soil sciences has launched an informative website called “[Plant Health International](#).” The initial focus of the site

is on plant root health and health management in the context of global food security. Cook said his goal is to communicate critical information to farmers, students, policy makers, and the general public—audiences that scientific literature doesn’t typically address.

“Sustainable agriculture is not enough,” Cook said, who won the 2011 Wolf Prize in Agriculture. “The world needs sustainable growth in agriculture to keep up with the growing human population in the face of climate change and declining natural resources. Effective and economical management of unseen and often misdiagnosed root diseases is one of the major scientific and technical pillars to meeting these challenges.”

The Plant Health International website is organized around six broad topics

reflecting Cook’s particular interests and experience. Cook’s career was devoted primarily to research on root diseases in cereal-intensive, no-till (direct-seed) cropping systems in the Pacific Northwest.

- Plant Health Management
- Root Diseases
- Biological Control
- Biotechnology
- No-Till Farming
- Communicating Science

Initial posts are based on Cook’s classic studies conducted over 50 years of agricultural science research and leadership. New material and resources will be added over time. Cook also hopes to include guest contributions.

“The role of plant health is foundational to achieving global food security,” Cook said. “This website is a way to reach and respond to those who most need to know more about the fundamentals, theory, practice, and benefits of plant health and plant health management.”

MLK Winner Uses Nature and Nurture to Teach

Doris Sonstelie has found a place in the sun for thousands of children to plant seeds, pluck weeds, dispense water and reap rewards. A volunteer member of WSU Extension’s Master Gardener Program in Yakima County, she’s been cultivating green thumbs since 2006.

As lead instructor of the youth gardening program, Sonstelie travels throughout Yakima County to teach children from all income backgrounds and nationalities how food is connected to nature and the seasons by growing vegetables with them. But she does more than teach. Place her on a patch of dirt with a group of kids and watch joy emerge as large as pumpkins.

“She reaches out; she cares. She’s an amazingly compassionate mentor,” said Yakima 4-H program coordinator Jennifer Loyd. “I think the impact she has



Sonstelie explains the different parts of a bean that students planted from seed at WSU’s Master Gardener Demonstration Garden in Yakima. Photo

on kids is long-term, not only with regard to education, but also making them feel good about who they are.”

courtesy of Doris Sonstelie.

Loyd’s evidence-based assessment is why WSU selected Sonstelie for the 2013 Martin Luther King Jr. Distinguished Community Service Award.

Digging Deeper

Watching a speck in the soil grow into an eight-foot-tall sunflower or a thick orange carrot exudes a certain magic that makes children excited to learn, said Sonstelie. “I love getting in the dirt with them and seeing their faces light up,” she said.

Sonstelie works with children enrolled in 23 different programs, including [4-H youth development](#), [Daisy Girl Scouts](#), and [Ready by Five](#). Horticulture is a “remarkable teaching tool” for subjects ranging from science and math to art and music, according to Sonstelie. She and her students sing about insects and birds, make vegetable puppets, and measure spaces between seeds. They also talk about the natural scientific process of composting and analyze soil under microscopes.

“The kids are always surprised when they see all the fungus, insects, bits of leaves, and twigs,” Sonstelie said.

Sonstelie’s motivation for nurturing young gardeners comes from genuinely caring about them and the plants they grow. “I can see how it builds their self-esteem.” But there’s another, broader benefit in showing children you care: “To grow something in the ground, you have to take care of it along the way. My hope is these kids will learn to love nature enough to take care of it, now and always.”

–Linda Weiford

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