

2000 AWARD OF HONOR PRESENTATION



JOHN MENGE

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University of California, Riverside*

Award presented by Gary Bender

Good afternoon. It is an honor and a privilege to introduce the person who is to receive the Award of Honor from the California Avocado Society.

Our honoree is unique. He was born and raised in Minnesota where he spent his youth out in the backwoods canoeing, hiking, fishing, shooting, and learning about nature. He earned a Bachelor Degree in Forestry from the University of Minnesota. There is an interesting story about when he was drafted into the army - his paperwork went to Vietnam but he didn't. At the last minute he was sent to a biological weapons station in Utah. When he arrived they said: "Well, you're not in the army. We don't have your paperwork." He said, "Well, I'm here. What do you want me to do?" When they asked what he could do he said, "Well, I can shoot." So they handed him a gun, and told him to roam the perimeter and shoot jackrabbits. Apparently they were working on a few organisms that they wanted to make sure would not get off the property via wild life. And that's what he did.

After the army he married his wife, Janice. He continued his education in North Carolina where he worked on his Ph D. in forest pathology. When he graduated in the 1970's, the forest service had not been hiring for about seven or eight years. Our honoree wanted to work with tree pathology and eventually got the job as citrus pathologist at U.C. Riverside. He followed the footsteps of Dr. Zentmyer to become the resident avocado pathologist. I'm sure you are all now aware that the person we are talking about is Dr. John Menge.

Let us look at a few of John's accomplishments. John has continued to work with George Zentmyer in selecting and breeding avocado rootstocks to improve resistance to the fungus *Phytophthora cinnamomi*. He has tested thousands of seedlings from promising selections and has imported and tested promising selections from Israel, South Africa and other countries. He has made crosses for many of these selection looking for improved resistance. He has rootstock trials in all the avocado growing regions of the state. Things have progressed so well that Mexican seedlings are no longer used as controls in the trials, which is a major step forward. Duke 7 and Thomas are now the controls. John and his graduate students have worked out methods for replanting avocados in root rot infested soils. These techniques include the use of gypsum and woody mulch to reestablish a planting.

The reputation of John Menge in the world is truly amazing. Every avocado scientist in the world has made the trip to the Menge Lab to learn from John, his students and his technicians. Unlike many of the professors today, John is truly a field professor of field research. Just a few weeks ago he held seminars both in southern and northern rootstock trials to show the growers the improvements in rootstocks. He has never turned down a call from me, or the other farm advisors, to give a talk to growers. We really appreciate that. John has numerous articles in scientific publications and trade journals. Under his guidance, 22 students have completed a Ph.D. degree.

I also have a few stories to tell you about John to help you get to know the man. As I mentioned, John loves biology. He loves to classify things. He knows plants, birds, mushrooms, animals - everything there is wandering out there in the hills. He can tell you what it is right down to the genus and species. He loves biological classification so much that he named his daughter Linnae after Linnaeus, the father of our biological classification system.

There has been a misstep or two in John's teaching career. He conducts a biology class at UCR where his students collect mushrooms, bring them back to the lab, and identify them. He likes to have them cook these things and taste them, at least the ones that are non-toxic and maybe tasty. And there was this one fungus brought in that was growing on the roots of a tree. John said, "Oh, that's delicious. It tastes like chicken. Let's cook it up and eat it." They all ate it and became ill - the whole class. It turns out this particular fungus growing on an oak tree is good, but on a eucalyptus tree it can become toxic. John received a memo from the Chancellor. "To John Menge: It has come to my attention that there was a poisoning incident in the biology lab. This is to inform you that it is against University policy to poison students in biology. Please take all necessary measures to avoid poisoning incidences in the future. P.S. We don't want to lose any students as we need all the tuition money we can get."

Now, I have to tell you one more thing. John has a project coming up. He's going to travel to New Guinea to where we think is the origin of *Phytophthora cinnamomi*. He wants to collect soil to look for biological control agents that could fight the root rot fungus. These are the lengths John goes to on behalf of avocado growers.

John, you are a colleague and a friend, and an excellent scientist. We all congratulate you on receiving the Award of Honor this year.

John Menge:

I do want to thank you very much for this award. I don't think there's any greater award that you can get than that which comes from the growers you are working with. It makes you feel like you really are accomplishing something. I am glad that you think that we have done a good job for you, because I think there's a lot more to be done, and we're just beginning. I would expect many more great things to be coming out of this work. Thanks, very much.