



# College of Agriculture, Food and Environment

DEPARTMENT OF PLANT AND SOIL SCIENCES

# ALUMNI NEWSLETTER

Fall 2021, Issue II

**3** MESSAGE FROM THE  
DEPARTMENT CHAIR

**6** STUDENT INTERVIEWS

**12** ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

**14** AWARDS

The Department of Plant and Soil Sciences is one of 14 academic departments in the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment (CAFE). The department's programs are diverse in both our mission areas – teaching, research, and extension; and in our broad areas of interest – crop science, environmental science, plant molecular biology, and soil science. The department has over 40 faculty members and 60+ staff members as well as post-doctoral scholars, graduate research assistants, and visiting scholars.



## Table of Contents

Page 3: Message from the Chair

Pages 4-5: Meet the Students

Pages 6-7: Grad Student Interviews

Pages 8-9: Undergraduate Interviews

Page 10: Special Thank-You

Page 11: IPSS Symposium 2021

Pages 12-13: Alumni Spotlight

Pages 14-15: Faculty Awards

Pages 16-17: Emeritus Faculty Awards

Page 18: Faculty Promotions

Pages 18-19: Alumni Awards

Pages 20-21: Student Awards

Page 22: Retirements

Page 23: Spindletop Farm Updates

Page 24: Upcoming Events

## Welcome

**W**elcome to the second alumni newsletter from the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences at the University of Kentucky. We're happy that we've reached you. Depending on when you graduated, a lot may have changed. If you completed your program a while ago, you may be wondering if this newsletter is for you. Yes! We want to connect all alumni of our Department with our current faculty and students.

Know someone who would like to hear from us? Feel free to forward the newsletter and encourage them to update their contact info. This is a bi-annual publication so we won't be bombarding your inbox/mailbox – we have other options for staying connected on a more regular basis when you update your contact information at <https://bit.ly/35Yh9mV>.

# Message from the Chair

Greetings Alums!

It has been a busy 2021 so far for our Department, with an attempt to return to normal this Fall. We are teaching, mostly in-person. We are trying to have a normal seminar series, but are being challenged by technology issues, supply chain shortages, and COVID upticks. Extension continues to be challenged by COVID, with guidelines and restrictions often under county control. Research is perhaps the most 'normal' activity for most of us. We persevere and work to keep our various missions moving forward. I think you'll find plenty of evidence of this in the Fall newsletter.



We are proud to welcome 14 new graduate students this year and 6 new undergraduates in the Agricultural Ecosystem Science degree program. We have had several faculty win prestigious awards. Our research and extension programs continue to receive regional and national recognition. And our graduates are successful in their various fields and make an impact in Kentucky and beyond.

We look forward to celebrating our first ever Round Up Alumni Event with those of you who can make it. It will take place outside (in the courtyard in front of the Plant Science Building) and will include alums and current faculty, staff, and students. We hope you can join us and make some new connections!

Sincerely,

*Rebecca L. McElroy*



## Meet the Students

### IPSS Graduate Students



### Spring 2021 Cohort

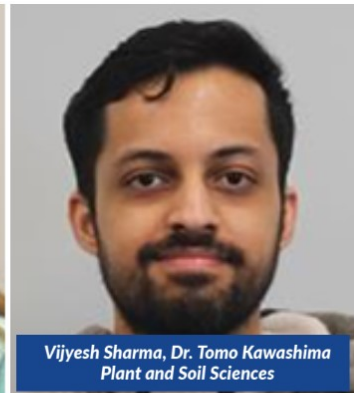
(Student - Academic Advisor - Department)



Paul Cockson, Dr. Bob Pearce  
Plant and Soil Sciences



Echo Gotsick, Dr. Ray Smith  
Plant and Soil Sciences



Vijyesh Sharma, Dr. Tomo Kawashima  
Plant and Soil Sciences



Ashwini Shivakumar, Dr. Tomo Kawashima  
Plant and Soil Sciences



Yan Zhou, Dr. Ling Yuan  
Plant and Soil Sciences

# Meet the Students

## Fall 2021 Cohort

(Student - Academic Advisor - Department)



*Victoria Bajek, Dr. Rachel Rudolph  
Horticulture*



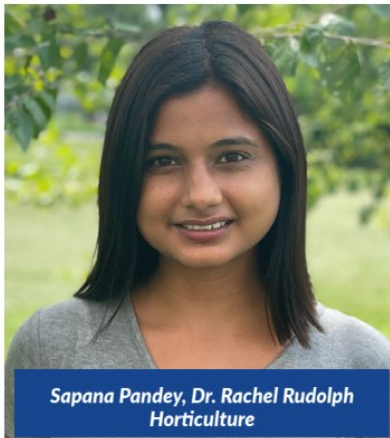
*Upama Dev, Dr. Luke Moe  
Plant and Soil Sciences*



*Jenni Fridgen, Dr. Josh McGrath  
Plant and Soil Sciences*



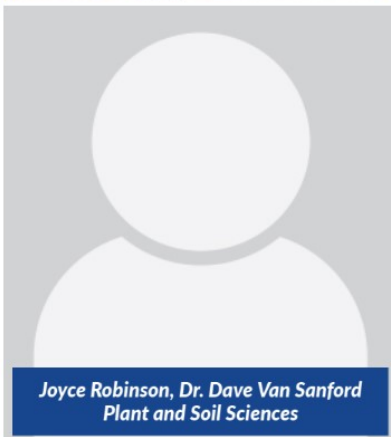
*Atilla Ilgun, Dr. Ole Wendroth  
Plant and Soil Sciences*



*Sapana Pandey, Dr. Rachel Rudolph  
Horticulture*



*Caleb Perkins, Dr. Andy Bailey  
Plant and Soil Sciences*



*Joyce Robinson, Dr. Dave Van Sanford  
Plant and Soil Sciences*



*Fatemeh Sheikhi Shahrivar,  
Dr. Ole Wendroth, PSS*



*Mounica Talasila, Dr. Montse Salmeron  
Plant and Soil Sciences*



## Grad Student Interviews

### Eric Luteyn



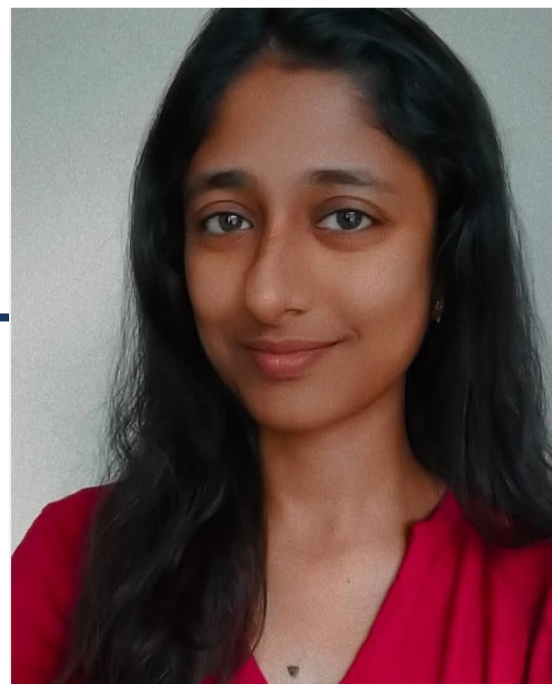
I'm originally from Kalamazoo, Michigan. I lived there until I made the decision to join military service at the age of 21. I was never really exposed to agriculture growing up. My background is in the construction trades. I spent over 10 years leading and performing various construction tasks for the Army Corps of Engineers. After transitioning out of military service, I received my undergraduate degree from UK. I met a lot of great people within the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment that really inspired me to continue my education. This led to my current degree program.

The degree that I am currently working on is the Master of Science degree in the IPSS Crop Science program and my faculty advisor is Dr. Timothy Phillips. My research focus for this degree is to document the diversity of forage and grain traits within the USDA's *Eragrostis tef* germplasm collection. I am also a Fellow in the NSF Graduate Research Traineeship (NRT) here at UK. In this program, I work in an interdisciplinary group to test the potential use of microalgae fertilizer on mine land spoil.

After I receive a Master of Science degree, I hope to continue my education and obtain a Ph.D. One day I want to work to increase global food security. I would like to work in international agriculture and provide tools and training to help promote plant breeding programs in countries that currently have very limited access to new breeding techniques. I feel like the IPSS program has helped shape the path forward for my future career and given me the skills needed to accomplish all tasks along the way.

# Grad Student Interviews

## Mounica Talasila



I'm from India and worked as a junior agronomist for Burley tobacco before starting grad school in the US 2 years ago. I'm the first person to choose to study agriculture in my family! I got my master's from Murray State during which I've worked on corn, soybean and hemp research trials. I happened to be on one of UK's farms during my project work at Murray State and saw firsthand the research work being done by UK. I admired it that day and, well, one year later, I'm here!! I want to work on sustainable agriculture with a focus on improving productivity of crops. I was looking for a doctoral program that aligns with my interests and came across the work being done in Dr. Montserrat Salmeron's lab. Under her guidance, I'll be studying planting dates of different soybean maturity groups in rainfed and irrigated conditions. Apart from this, I love to go on hikes, sketch, try different foods and read a lot. I've recently started learning Kathak (an Indian classical dance). I'm excited to start this Fall alongside such distinguished agriculture fraternity and would like to wish a safe and productive semester to everyone returning to campus.



## Undergraduate Interviews

### Meri Grace Carson



I am currently a junior dual majoring in Agriculture Ecosystems Science and Agriculture Economics. I am from Washington Court House, Ohio and grew up on my family's row crop corn and soybean operation where my passion for agriculture took root and has continued to grow over

the course of my life. I chose to attend the University of Kentucky because I wanted to go out-of-state and experience agriculture in another area. The diversity of Kentucky agriculture has provided me with many opportunities to do just that. I have learned so much about agriculture in this state during my time at UK from touring distilleries in Bardstown as well as horse farms surrounding Lexington all the way to row crop operations in Western Kentucky. I chose to pursue the Agriculture Ecosystems Science major because I am interested in agronomy. I feel that my time here at the University of Kentucky has prepared me to be able to go out into the industry and be dependable, adaptable, and progressive.



# Undergraduate Interviews

## Samantha Klotz

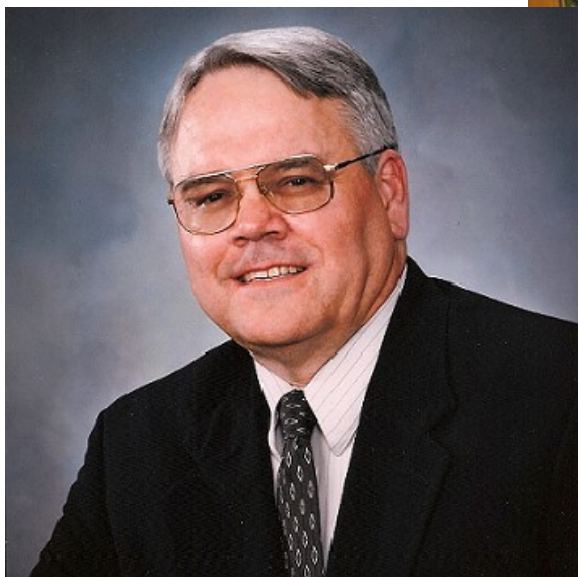


I grew up in a suburban area of eastern Pennsylvania. I do not come from an agricultural background. Turns out, I was looking for a school with a good agricultural college and Kentucky happened to land on my list. When I visited UK, I fell in love with not only the campus, but the area surrounding campus. I came into the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment undecided what my major would be. The summer before freshman year, Dr. Dave

McNear reached out to me and told me about the program. I nearly immediately said YES! I loved the diversity of classes that are required to take for the major and that once I took many of those classes, I could narrow down what I wanted to focus on. This was perfect for me because I had no idea what I wanted to do in the agriculture field. Since then, I have decided to focus mainly on crop production and animal sciences with a touch of leadership.



## Special Thank-You



Janice Scott, wife of the late alumnus H. Don Scott (pictured above), initiated the IPSS GSA's regalia rental program with her generous donation of Dr. Scott's hood as well as a financial gift that supported the purchase of two new gowns in the Spring of 2020. Dr. Don Scott was a Ph.D. student under Ron Phillips who went on to have a 30-year career at the University of Arkansas.

Left to right: Lauren Fann (H. Garman Entomology Club), Rebecca McGrail (IPSS GSA), Erica Fealko (Association of Plant Pathology Scholars), and Lucas Araujo (IPSS GSA). Two styles of gowns are displayed. One is for Ph.D. graduates and the other is for M.S. graduates.

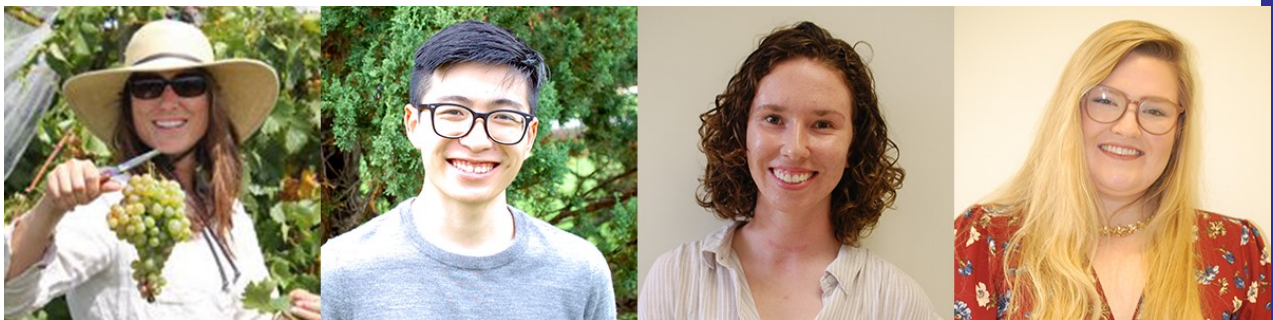
# IPSS Symposium 2021

The 2021 Dr. Donald L. Sparks & Dr. Bill Witt Integrated Plant and Soil Sciences Graduate Student Symposium was held on January 22, 2021. While the proceedings were held on Zoom, attendance and presentations were excellent! Everyone involved enjoyed seeing how our students have been persevering during the pandemic.



## Oral Presentation Winners:

1st—Mohammad Foteh Ali, 2nd—Rebecca McGrail, 3rd—Andrea Keeney



## Poster Presentation Winners:

1st—Patsy Wilson, 2nd—Kent Pham, 3rd—Annie McGraw & Hannah Somerville

Student posters can be viewed at  
<https://ipss.ca.uky.edu/symposium-posters>.



## Alumni Spotlight



Lindsey Slaughter, IPSS Alum, was recently awarded her first lead PI grant from USDA-NIFA! It is to study soil greenhouse gas production (focus on methane) in grass/legume pastures. Read more by visiting <https://today.ttu.edu/posts/2021/03/Stories/Slaughter-USDA>.

Lindsey first joined Dr. McCulley's lab as a Graduate Research Assistant while pursuing a M.S. in Plant and Soil Sciences in August 2010. In July 2012, she successfully defended her thesis. She immediately began working as a Ph.D. student in the lab. In April 2016, Lindsey successfully defended her dissertation and received her Ph.D. in Soil Science. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Soil Microbial Ecology & Biochemistry in the Department of Plant & Soil Science at Texas Tech University.

# Alumni Spotlight



Dr. Xi Zhang has recently accepted an offer to start a tenure-track faculty position in soil physics at the Red River Research Station in Shreveport and the School of Plant, Environmental, and Soil Sciences in Baton Rouge, LSU. Xi graduated with a Ph.D. in IPSS in summer of 2019, studying under Dr. Ole Wendroth, in soil physics and hydopedology with his dissertation on "Spatial estimation of hydraulic properties in structured soils at the field scale".



## Faculty Awards

Dr. Larry Grabau received a 2021 UK Global Impact Award for Distinguished Faculty Achievements in Education Abroad. His passionate dedication to Education Abroad, as evidenced by his long experience in leading UK students on innovative and transformative education abroad experiences in Ecuador, as well as his dedicated service on both the Education Abroad Advisory Committee and the International Advisory Council, exemplify values and best practices sought to recognize with this Global Impact Award.



Dr. JD Green was awarded the Garry Lacefield Public Services to Alfalfa Award by the Kentucky Forage & Grassland Council.

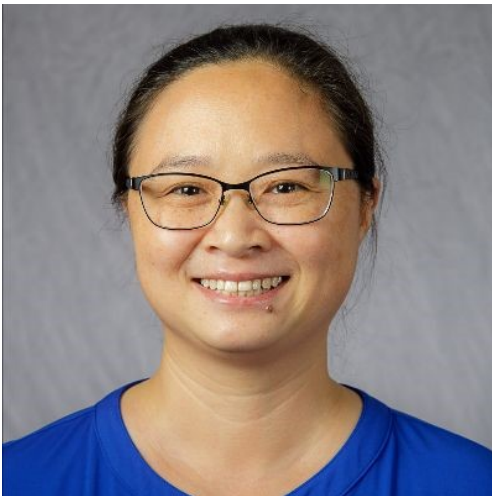
In recognition of Dr. Garry Lacefield's leadership in the Kentucky Alfalfa Program, the Public Service to Alfalfa Award was named in his honor in 2000 by the Kentucky Forage & Grassland Council.

Dr. Chad Lee was awarded the Outstanding Specialist Award by the Kentucky Association of County Agricultural Agents. The agents said, "His support and interaction with the County Agricultural Extension Agents has been unparalleled and his commitment to providing real world, timely research, information and recommendations, has helped him to become of the leading Extension Grain Crops Specialists in the nation." Dr. Lee said that this award is a result of teamwork with his extension specialist colleagues and research team, along with many other graduate students and undergrad students over the years.



# Faculty Awards

Dr. Travis Legleiter, Assistant Extension Professor in Weed Science, recently received the "Outstanding New Extension Faculty Award" from the Kentucky Association of State Extension Professionals (KASEP). This award is presented annually to a deserving Assistant Extension Professor who is a member of KASEP and has less than five years of service in Cooperative Extension, including all service as an Extension faculty member in Kentucky and any other state.



Dr. Wei Ren was selected as a recipient of a prestigious NSF CAREER grant aimed at using ecosystem monitoring and computer modeling to compare the impacts of climate-smart-agriculture practices used in corn and soybean production under various climate and soil conditions. By employing agroecosystem modeling and machine learning approaches, her team will predict the short, medium, and long-term effects of agricultural production practices, such as no-tillage and cover crops, on the environment. NSF gives CAREER awards to young faculty members who have the potential to serve as leaders in research and education in their area of study. As part of the five-year award, Dr. Ren will receive nearly \$510,000 for her research efforts.



Dr. Jason Unrine received the 2020 Thomas Poe Cooper Research Award from the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment.

Established by the will of Dean Cooper, the award is presented in recognition of outstanding career research achievement by a member of the College of Agriculture, Food and Environment faculty. Designed to recognize and encourage research excellence, the Thomas Poe Cooper Research Award is the college's premier award for distinguished scientific accomplishment.



## Emeritus Faculty Awards



Dr. Garry Lacefield, University of Kentucky professor emeritus, recently received the Headliner Award from the Livestock Publications Council for his significant contributions to the livestock industry.

During his 41-year career in the UK College of Agriculture, Food and Environment, Lacefield was a forage extension specialist. In this role, he helped forage and livestock producers make management decisions to improve their forage production operations and ultimately, their profitability. He is a world-renowned researcher of alfalfa and tall fescue and is the founder of the Kentucky Alfalfa and Stored Forage Conference, Kentucky Grazing Conference and the Kentucky Forages session during the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association annual conference.



# Emeritus Faculty Awards

Dr. Bill and Mary Witt were recently awarded the William E. Lyons Award. Bill and Mary are Professor Emeritus of the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences and the Department of Horticulture, respectively. Mary was also the first woman hired as a Cooperative Extension Specialist in the College of Agriculture and initiated the Kentucky Master Gardener Program, which continues strong today. Both Bill and Mary continue to serve a variety of agricultural-related entities and our community today. They are generous supporters of the annual Graduate Student Symposium for Integrated Plant and Soil Science Students and the Arboretum.



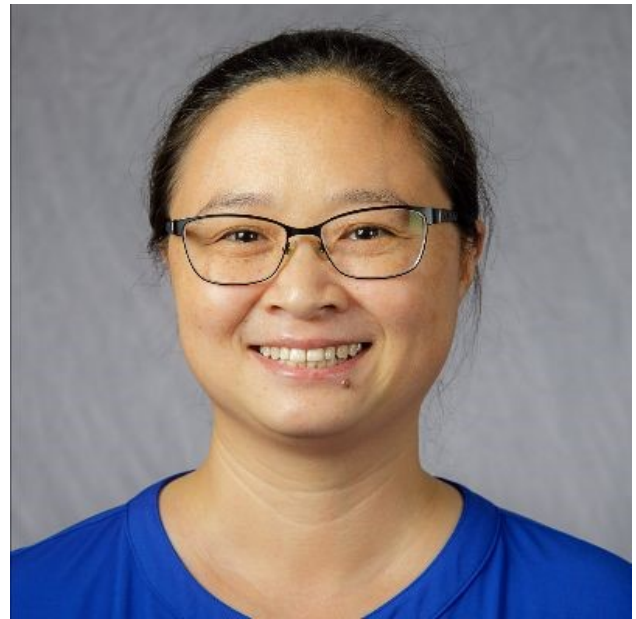
This award is given each year to an individual associated with the University of Kentucky who has provided outstanding service to the University, the community, and/or state. Their contributions to education, the University of Kentucky, the state of Kentucky, and at the international level demonstrate the type of individual the Lyons Award seeks to recognize each year.



## Faculty Promotions



Dr. Dave McNear - Full Professor



Dr. Wei Ren - Associate Professor

## Alumni Awards



Dr. Kenton Sena, IPSS alum, was recently selected for the **2020 Outstanding Paper** in the Forage and Grazinglands Section for Crop, Forage & Turfgrass Management (CFTM) for his article entitled "Switchgrass Growth and Forage Quality Trends Provide Insight for Management." Dr. Sena recognizes the assistance of co-authors Dr. S. Ray Smith, Department of Plant and Soil Sciences, as well as the critical assistance from David Davis, IPSS alum, and Dr. Ben Goff, former Faculty with the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences. Dr. Sena conducted this research as part of his undergraduate senior research project with Dr. Smith's research program.

# Alumni Awards



Dr. Dennis Hancock was selected by the IPSS GSA as the recipient of the **2021 IPSS Alumnus Early Career Award**. Dr. Hancock earned his M.S. in Plant and Soil Sciences in 1999 and his Ph.D. in Crop Science in 2006. His dissertation advisor was Dr. Charles Dougherty. Dr. Hancock is the new director of the U.S. Dairy Forage Research Center in Madison, WI. He was previously a tenured professor in the Crop and Soil Sciences Department at the University of Georgia.



Dr. John Fellers is the **2021/2022 Distinguished Alumnus Award** recipient. Dr. Fellers is currently a Research Molecular Biologist with USDA-ARS in Manhattan, KS, and is an Adjunct Professor at Kansas State University. His research focus is plant molecular biology. He received his B.S. and M.S. degrees in Agronomy at Oklahoma State University. He received his Ph.D. in Crop Science at the University of Kentucky in 1996 under Dr. Glenn Collins.



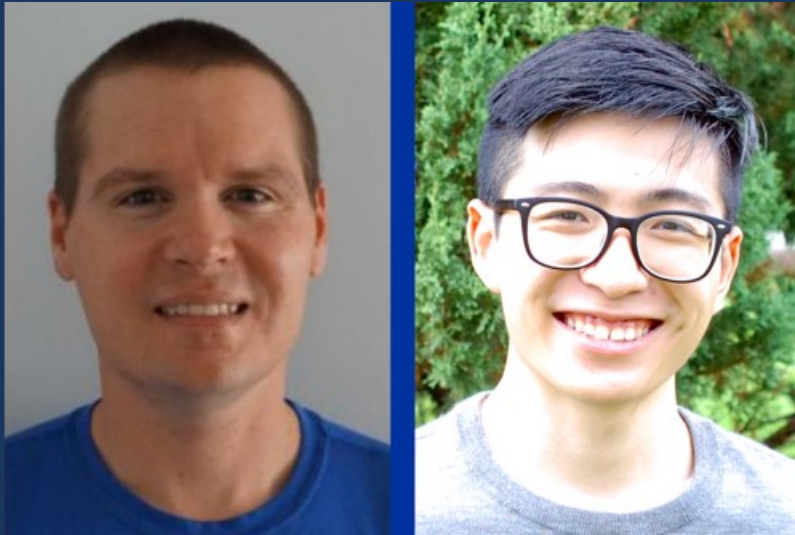
## Student Awards



Eric Luteyn, M.S. student with Dr. Tim Phillips, was recently selected as a **2021 Borlaug Scholar** based upon his accomplishments, academic performance, letter of recommendation, and passion for plant breeding. The Borlaug Scholars Committee selected a total of 24 individuals to comprise the Class of 2021, with 18 graduate and 6 undergraduates students. This makes the 4th class of the NAPB Borlaug Scholars.

With the award, Eric will be attending the NAPB annual meeting hosted by Cornell University this year. "The benefits that I am most interested in are meeting all the leading experts in the field and being paired with a mentor that is a member of the NAPB, works in the area that I am interested in, and will be committed to my professional development," says Eric Luteyn.

# Student Awards



Two IPSS graduate students, Eric Luteyn and Kent Pham, recently received notification that their research proposal has been funded for this summer. Eric and Kent are working with students from forestry and chemistry to grow microalgae as a fertilizer to remediate mineland soil.

These collaborative research proposals and the associated awards are part of a National Science Foundation Research Traineeship (NRT) in which Dr. Luke Moe, Department of

Plant and Soil Sciences Associate Professor, serves as Senior Personnel while both Kent and Eric participate as trainees.

In UK's NRT, teams of trainees partake in a number of initiatives designed to further integrate research and education and ensure interdisciplinarity, including competitive research grants for which each term submits an interdisciplinary collaborative proposal.

These collaborative research grants include all elements of a funding opportunity, i.e., a solicitation, competitive review, and a reporting process. Solicitation review criteria include the extent of collaboration between trainees from different departments, the extent of inter- and trans-disciplinarity and the broader impacts of the work proposed. By helping students hone several of the skills taught in a course they all take – namely, Transferable Skills for Scientists & Engineers (GS 599) – this initiative is meant to fully integrate education and research as well as to ensure that the latter is not only interdisciplinary but also transdisciplinary in nature. The proposals submitted are both peer-reviewed as well as reviewed by faculty associated with the traineeship, top proposals being awarded NRT funds.

The NRT is currently recruiting students. Any prospective or current graduate student in a participating department and/or whose research is related to food, energy and water systems (FEWS) is welcome to apply. The application can be found at <https://nrt.uky.edu/>.



## Retirements



**Dr. Bob Miller** recently retired from the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences at the University of Kentucky. He became a faculty member in 1980 (3 years at UK, followed by 17 years at UT, then 22 years jointly at UK/UT).

When reflecting on his time at the university, some of Dr. Miller's favorite memories included his relationship with graduate students, employees who have been so critical to his success, and particularly the farmers that he has gotten to know over the years. He particularly enjoyed the numerous occasions when farmers told him that the disease resistant varieties he had developed had kept them in business.



**James Dollarhide** also recently retired from the Department of Plant and Soil Sciences at the University of Kentucky. He worked for the university for 38 years and 3 months. As an alumni, you may remember working with him at Spindletop Farm. James was such an important contributor to our department. He could fix just about anything.

# Spindletop Farm Updates



In 2020, Matthew Allen received a **Sustainability Challenge Grant** entitled "Honoring Kentucky's Agricultural Excellence". This was accompanied by funds from the department and college. He and his team members, Dr. Erin Haramoto (Plant and Soil Sciences) and Dr. Rebekah Epps (Community and Leadership Development), will have a mural painted on the exterior of the Agronomy Building. The mural is intended to be a focal point of the many different types of visits made to Spindletop, such as classes, Extension outreach, field days, industry meetings, and student recruitment.

The University of Kentucky's community is composed of people from all over the world. While we may come from different social, economic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, there are two values that every society shares: agriculture and art. This project is aimed to create a sense of connectivity and inclusivity between all UK community members by placing murals on agricultural structures at UK's Spindletop Farm that honor our past, celebrate our present, and inspire our future.

Stay tuned for the final results.



College of Agriculture,  
Food and Environment

*Plant and Soil Sciences*

## Upcoming Events

- S.H. Phillips Distinguished Lecture in No-Till Agriculture - November 19, 2021
- IPSS Symposium - January 7, 2022
- IPSS Early Career Alumnus Award Seminar - Spring 2022 (date TBD)

## Stay Connected

**If you enjoy receiving this newsletter and want to continue to do so,  
please let us know by visiting**

**[https://uky.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8A49ZR8vojrlaup](https://uky.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8A49ZR8vojrlaup)**



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