

Stephen Diachun, 1912 to 1994

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Stephen Diachun, Emeritus Professor of Plant Pathology at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, died on 24 April 1994 after a distinguished career as a teacher and scientist. Dr. Diachun was born on 20 August 1912 in Phenix, RI. He received a B.S. degree with highest honors from the University of Rhode Island, in 1934, followed by M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Plant Pathology from the University of Illinois, in 1935 and 1938, respectively.

He joined the University of Kentucky in 1937 as an assistant in Plant Pathology in the Department of Agronomy and advanced through the ranks of assistant professor and associate professor to professor of Agronomy in 1959. He played a major role in establishing the new Department of Plant Pathology in 1963, and at that time, he was appointed professor of Plant Pathology. Five years later he accepted the responsibilities of chairman of the department, a position he filled with distinction until his retirement in 1978. With the exception of a sabbatical appointment at the University of Wisconsin-Madison during 1967 to 1968 as a visiting professor of Plant Pathology, he completed 41 years of dedicated service at the University of Kentucky.

Dr. Diachun made major contributions to his university and profession as a research scientist, teacher, and administrator. Early in his career he focused his research on the nature and control of diseases of burley tobacco in close collaboration with W. D. Valleau and E. M. Johnson, who were recognized as national leaders in research on tobacco diseases. Many of his research findings aided in the development of disease-resistant cultivars and in cultural practices that are still essential components of general management programs that are important in the production of burley tobacco. He was the first to discover that certain bacterial plant pathogens, such as the wildfire bacterium, can over-winter on the roots of nonhost as well as host species—an observation important in understanding the epidemiology and survival in soil of these pathogens.

During the period from 1952 to 1975 he worked closely with Lawrence Henson, and they published 27 papers on the bean yellow mosaic virus affecting red clover, with emphasis on aspects of control and breeding for resistance. These studies resulted in the identification of clones of red clover with resistance to bean yellow mosaic virus and led to the development and release of red clover cultivars with resistance not only to bean yellow mosaic but also to other diseases of red clover. The breeding material they developed has been incorporated in a number of breeding programs in continuing efforts to improve red clover cultivars.

Dr. Diachun devoted much of his energy and interest to teaching plant pathology and, in particular, to introductory undergraduate courses. During his teaching career, he taught courses in general botany, general agronomy, and mycology. He greatly enjoyed his contact with undergraduate and graduate students, and this was reflected in the positive response of students to his approach to instruction. In recognition of his commitment and excellence

as an instructor, he was invited to serve as the first director of the honors program for undergraduates at the University of Kentucky, an appointment that he held for 5 years.

In the views of many of his colleagues, Dr. Diachun made his most significant contributions to the University of Kentucky as a result of his influential leadership role in major policy decisions at various administrative levels. One colleague observed, "Stephen Diachun is respected for his thoughtfulness, for his open-minded conservatism, and for his dogged insistence on excellence and good educational policies." He was perhaps the only plant pathologist in the United States who served as a member of the Board of Trustees of his home university. He also was elected to serve as presiding officer of the university Senate and chairman of the university Senate Council. His contributions in these positions of influence earned him the high esteem of fellow faculty members and administrative officers of the university.

In recognition of his activities and contributions as a scientist and teacher, Dr. Diachun was named University of Kentucky Alumni Professor in 1974. During the same year, he also was selected as one of the recipients of the Fellow Award of The American Phytopathological Society. In all of his activities, he displayed a characteristic modesty and sincere unselfish interest in the advancement of colleagues. He energetically sought to strengthen his department by adding a number of outstanding faculty as well as seeking to attract highly qualified young scientists. He was dedicated to his university and profession without regard to personal prestige or recognition for his own contributions.

In all of his activities he was supported and encouraged by his devoted wife, Eunice. Although she had earned a law degree, she chose not to practice and assisted him in his strong commitment to professional assignments. The Diachuns had a truly remarkable, close relationship in their marriage that reflected their deep affection and mutual high regard. Steve and Eunice were gracious hosts and enjoyed entertaining friends and visitors in their home. They shared a common love of music and interest in the arts and were usually in attendance whenever there was a chamber or symphonic music concert or an opera performance in the vicinity of Lexington. Steve was also a long-time and enthusiastic member of a barbershop quartet.

After his retirement, Dr. Diachun continued to explore a range of interesting research topics, seeking to satisfy his curiosity about unanswered questions in areas of previous investigations. In his continuing associations with colleagues in his department, he enjoyed engaging faculty and students in discussions about science in general, a broad range of research topics in plant pathology, and current affairs.

He was a member of the honorary societies of Phi Kappa Phi, Phi Beta Kappa, Phi Sigma, and Gamma Sigma Delta. In addition to participation in many university and college committees, he was a member of a number of APS committees, including the Placement and Finance committees.

Dr. Diachun is survived by his sons, Timothy Diachun of Lexington, KY, and Peter Diachun of Youngstown, NY, and six grandchildren.