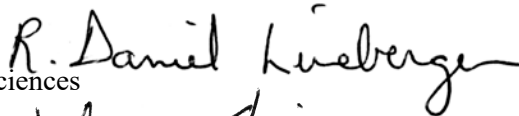


1 June 2020

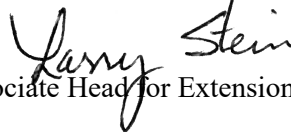
MEMORANDUM

TO: Jeff Hyde
 Director, Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service

FROM: R. Daniel Lineberger
 Professor and Head of Horticultural Sciences



Larry Stein
 Professor and Extension Specialist, Associate Head for Extension



SUBJECT: Recommendation of Dr. Jerry Parsons for Professor and Extension Specialist Emeritus

It is with great pride that we submit an Emeritus nomination, Professor and Extension Horticulturist, for Dr. Jerry Parsons. As we began work on other nominations, we learned the Parsons' potential nomination had been overlooked for a number of reasons, but whatever the case, this nomination definitely needs to go forward. There is no doubt in our minds that Parsons put the Texas Agricultural Extension Service (forerunner to Texas A & M AgriLife Extension Service) on the map for most Texans and even the world. In his 17-year feature as the *Weekend Gardener* on KENS TV in San Antonio, he reached an audience numbered in the millions and he closed every segment with, "this is Jerry Parsons with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service!"

Part of the explanation that his nomination may have been overlooked was that Parsons still continues to work promoting Extension practices for horticulture and gardening even in his "retirement." A quick scan of his personal Website, *Plantanswers.com*, reveals it to be almost a mirror image of the content he developed in the *PlantANSWERS* section of *Aggie Horticulture* for more than a decade. Jerry was an early adopter of Web technology and it quickly became his goal to have all Extension Horticulture information on the Web so that it could be accessed by all Texans. In reality it became available to the world. As this body of knowledge grew, so did the possibility of losing all this work. Parsons insisted that the Webmaster provide him with a backup of all the information to prevent loss in the event of hardware failure. As the volume continued to grow, he had the information placed on an additional server to insure this information would not be lost. It is only fitting that *Aggie Horticulture* has been the premiere site for horticulture information for many years and this is due in large part to Parsons efforts.

Parsons' work reached far beyond technology, and his accomplishments are enough for at least three careers! Dr. Parsons is the "father" of the *Texas Superstar*[®] program, a program which has allowed every Texan the opportunity to grow fail-safe, environmentally-adapted plants with outstanding ornamental attributes. Included in the list of *Texas Superstar*[®] plants are Gold Star Esperanza, Firebush, Henry Duelberg salvia, Texas Gold Columbine, New Gold lantana, and John Fanick phlox (see *TexasSuperstar.com*). For many of these plants, propagation and production techniques had to be developed before the plants could be available to the general public. Parsons' guiding principle in working with the *Texas Superstar*[®] plants was to make sure when he promoted a plant that the customer could find it. Sometimes this involved working hand in hand with a research colleague to solve a production issue as with Texas Gold Columbine which requires a cold period to germinate, or the Texas bluebonnets transplants in which the seed had to be acid-scarified to achieve uniform germination. The *Texas Superstar*[®] program continues today, involving a team effort between Agrilife Research, University, and Agrilife Extension specialists and county horticulturists who identify, refine, and test new ornamental,

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fruit, and vegetable selections adapted to Texas growing conditions. Parsons still maintains a testing site for these potential new plants today.

One of Dr. Parsons' greatest accomplishments was the "colorization" of the state flower of Texas, the bluebonnet. Parsons was challenged by Carol Abbot, noted Texas plantsman, to develop red, white and blue bluebonnets to be planted as a flag for the Texas sesquicentennial. Dr. Parsons initially scoffed at the challenge, as there was already blue and occasionally white flowering types, so how hard could it be to find a red? Needless to say it was much harder than he ever thought, but he did succeed. Most would be satisfied with that accomplishment, but Jerry is already thinking ahead to the 200th anniversary of Texas as he continues to maintain seed of the three colors and is working to have the seed available for that event in 2036! Furthermore, the development of the "Maroon" bluebonnet by Parsons is highlighted to this day in the freshmen orientation session which all incoming freshmen view as part of onboarding to Texas A & M University.

Without doubt, the adaptations necessitated by the current pandemic challenge is changing the way we do business in Extension, but Parsons experienced such a challenge about mid-point in his career and most would have probably quit. Jerry was diagnosed with inoperable Crohn's disease but with the help of medication and Internet connectivity, Jerry was able to continue his dynamic Extension program from home. This happened over 30 years ago, and was a powerful demonstration of our ability to use technology to deliver information from alternate work locations.

Dr. Jerry Parsons was an outstanding contributor to the Extension mission in Texas. The archival repository of outstanding horticultural information he developed, and continues to develop, has had a profound impact on commercial horticulture and the gardening public. Jerry embodied the Extension philosophy of team collaboration and public-private partnerships to advance his Extension programs. We, along with our peer review committee, recommend his appointment as Professor and Extension Specialist Emeritus in recognition of his outstanding achievements.

Summary of Discussion on Emeritus Status by a Review Committee in the Texas A&M University Department of Horticultural Sciences for Dr. Jerry M. Parsons

A peer review committee met June 15, 2020 and determined that Dr. Jerry M. Parsons, retired Professor and Extension Specialist for Texas A&M Agricultural Extension Service (Texas A&M AgriLife Extension) conducted himself in a manner consistent with the values of Texas A&M University, and meets the criteria as an Emeritus Professor in the Department of Horticultural Sciences.

The opinions and conclusions stated in this report regarding the candidate accurately reflect the views of the Emeritus Review Committee including Dr. Russell Wallace, Dr. Juan Anciso and Dr. Steve George. This document was originally prepared by Dr. Russell Wallace with edits from the committee as a whole incorporated.

Dr. Jerry M. Parsons, Professor and Extension Horticulturist
Summary of Accomplishments

Dr. Jerry Parsons was hired in 1974 by the Texas Agricultural Extension Service to be the District 13 Area Vegetable Specialist serving the vegetable production industry in the San Antonio and Wintergarden area. He took a position which was created before the District Headquarters in Uvalde was established so Parsons had his office at the Bexar County Extension office. This meant that Dr. Parsons was one of a very few specialists housed in an urban county office. This is important because urban insight and media opportunities enabled Dr. Parsons to accomplish his many educational activities.

Inspired by a comment by the late Director John Hutchison (“I NEVER want to drive into a county in Texas and, when stopping in a service station in that county to ask for directions, find there is someone in town who doesn’t know who the Extension person is!”), Parsons set about the task of bringing notoriety to Extension while educating the urban and rural masses. He realized traditional meetings were not the answer and could never have a huge impact in a metropolitan area. However, he did do traditional meetings and lots of them; **2250 meetings with over 200,000 people attending.** One of his best was his talk “This Food Is Killing Me!” about the misrepresentations inflicted upon the agricultural industry of Texas and the U.S.

MASS MEDIA: Parsons was drawn to providing educational horticulture information to potential audiences of over 100,000 at a time. Parsons knew that a media presence required a dedicated effort to quality programming which mixes entertainment with education. Dull programming doesn’t last on any medium. Parsons was anything but dull and his lively presentations on radio and television have made impressions on millions of listeners and viewers. His longevity in newspaper, radio and television testify to his popularity. Luckily, most of these Parsons-ized efforts have been preserved.

Parsons wrote for the **San Antonio Light with a circulation of over 325,000 each Sunday for 18 years** and furnished **1325 columns; 500 question-and-answer segments; and 1200 black-and-white photographs with scripts.** The majority of the newspaper columns can be found at: http://www.plantanswers.com/garden_columns.htm

Dr. Jerry Parsons began doing radio with Bill McReynolds in 1977 on Clear Channel radio WOAI-AM (AM-1200). He did an 8-minute horticulture program on Monday and Thursday at 11:45 a.m.. The programs were rebroadcast the following morning at 5:15 a.m. Because of the Clear Channel status, the programs were heard all over the U.S. and Canada. The **WOAI Bill McReynolds Garden Show ran until 1994, after 17 years of broadcast.** He did over **1768 programs** with an Arbitron Listener Rating (for the San Antonio area only) of 43,000 persons per show. Parsons also had a **tenure on KKYX-AM (680) for 10 years and did over 520 Saturday morning (8-10) 2-hour call-in,** question-and-answer programs with an Arbitron Listener rating of 32,000 persons per show. Since 1999 Parsons continues to do a call-in radio program on Saturdays and Sundays from 12:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. on KLUP Radio (AM 930). **To date, Parsons has done over 3380, 2-hour programs in the 8 years** with an Arbitron rating of over 22,000 persons per show. Samples of all of these radio programs can be found at: http://www.plantanswers.com/radio_subject_matter.htm

Parsons began doing the 'Weekend Gardener' segments on KENS-TV (CBS) live on the noon newscast (Neilson Stats Rating of 275,000 people per show) and taped on the 6 o'clock news segment (Neilson Stats Rating of 475,000 people per show) with Bruce Kates on February 5, 1982. He did **over 800, 3-minute programs which were televised twice on Fridays for the noon and six o'clock news horticulture segment for 17 years until 1998.** The six o'clock segment was satellite broadcast on CBS Southwest and used in other metropolitan areas such as Houston and New York. Parsons also did an interview program with Chris Marrou and Dan Cook named 'Eye on SA with Chris Marrou' on KENS-TV (CBS) on every Friday at 4 p.m. (Neilson Stats Rating of 156,000 people per show) beginning on March 31, 1989, and ending on August 31, 1990 or for 17 months. Samples of the many of the Parsons' television programs can be found at: <http://www.plantanswers.com/resources.htm#videos>

SUPERSTAR PLANTS: Dr. Jerry Parsons "orchestrated" all of the media to saturate consumers with information about superior horticultural products and procedures. He would recommend Extension tried-and-proven plant varieties to the public only after coordinating with wholesale nurseries an adequate supply to be available in retail nurseries. He introduced over **20 varieties of tomatoes, 10 varieties of peppers, and numerous superior varieties of Brussels sprouts, cantaloupe, sweet corn, onion, squash, broccoli, spinach and cauliflower. Parsons also introduced mandarin oranges (Satsumas)** and promoted all recommended fruit and nut varieties for Texas' growers. In the mid-80's, Parsons took the challenge to introduce and promote ornamental plants. The system worked and Parsons took the system statewide with the name Texas SuperStar plants. The majority of the 40 plant selections which have attained the Texas SuperStar status have originated in San Antonio under the tutelage of horticulture interests in the area. The financial impact of the **Texas SuperStar (CEMAP) Plant Program since its beginning in the fall of 1989 through spring of 2007 is a very conservative \$15 million.** This estimate takes into consideration number of items sold and the wholesale and retail sales price as derived from the major wholesale growers (Hines, ColorSpot and Greenleaf) in the state. This means that the value-added components are not included nor is the production of smaller wholesale plant producers across the state.

INTERNET: Parsons experienced unfortunate health issues in 1995; Crohns disease. Parsons' case was inoperable and he was very ill for many months. This illness led him to consider promoting horticulture on-line. He may have been too weak to work in the field, but he could work for a few hours in front of a computer. Most would have given up, but not Parsons and as a result his PLANTanswers site has grown into one of the most widely used horticulture websites in the world. Interest in PLANTanswers and usage of the site has been phenomenal as recorded and evaluated by Webtrends at:

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/webstat/webtrends.html> and <http://www.plantanswers.com/resources.htm#webstats> **In 2003, PLANTanswers had 2,275,483 visitors; in 2004, it had 3,124,176 visitors; in 2005, it had 3,917,991 visitors; and in 2006, PLANTanswers had 4,286,828 visitors, or 11,745 visitors daily.**

ACCOMPLISHMENT BULLETS:

- (1) **Considering all media accomplished by Parsons in 33 years it is undisputable that he delivered the Extension educational message to the greatest potential audience of any specialist in history.**
- (2) **Parsons was the first to deliver Extension educational information which was interrupted with commercial advertisements in 1977.**
- (3) **Parsons popularized and marketed more new plants to the Texas gardening public than any Extension specialist in history.**
- (4) **Parsons is the only Extension specialist in history to patent a plant.**
- (5) **Parsons was the first to report millions of website contacts as official Extension, verifiable contacts which were reported directly to the Legislative Budget Board by Director Ed Smith.**
- (6) **Parsons has generated the greatest financial impact on the Texas nursery industry of any specialist in history.**
- (7) **Parsons created the first Texas flag in history planted using only the state flower of Texas, the bluebonnet. Parsons spent 20 years developing the white and red bluebonnet. See: <http://www.plantanswers.com/sabbstory.htm>**
- (8) **Parsons is the only Extension specialist in the world to ever have three of his flowers named after First Ladies of the U.S. – the ‘Barbara Bush Lavender’ Bluebonnet (see: <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/cemap/bluebonnet/BarbaraBush.html>) and the ‘Laura Bush’ and ‘Pink Laura Bush’ petunia (see: http://www.plantanswers.com/petunia_bush.htm)**

All of these selections have been planted at the White House during the two Bush presidencies. Soon there will be a ‘White Laura Bush’ petunia and a ‘Lady Bird Johnson Royal Blue’ bluebonnet.

- (9) Parsons was the lead author on the most widely distributed publications in Extension history. **Over 900,000 Spring and Fall Gardening Tabloids were distributed from county Extension offices and local retail garden centers beginning in the fall of 1979 and continuing to 2000.** These publications were funded by public and private sources. The contents of these publications can be seen at:

<http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/PLANTanswers/earthkind/ekgarden2.html>

Neil Sperry

THE DEFINITIVE WORD IN TEXAS HORTICULTURE
SINCE 1978

June 11, 2020

Dear Texas A&M Administrators and Regents,

I am writing in support of Dr. Jerry Parsons, retired from the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, for consideration of the title of *Professor and Extension Horticulturist Emeritus*.

Dr. Parsons and I began our work with Texas A&M's Extension Service about the same time in the early 1970s. I left Extension in 1978 to go into garden communications via radio and newspaper writing, but our various projects have kept the two of us in close contact ever since.

Dr. Parsons continued working for Texas A&M Extension until retirement age, and he continues working in that chosen field even as I write this today. He is an amazing ambassador for horticulture in our state and a tireless worker alongside his Extension and industry colleagues.

I frequently call on Dr. Parsons for professional help. He is knowledgeable. He is highly respected. He is entertaining. And most of all, he is honest. He is one of the finest Extension employees I have ever known.

Among his honors during his tenure were the Superior Service Award (1982), The Extension Covington Award from the American Society for Horticultural Sciences (1987), Award in Excellence from Texas A&M (1987), Faculty Distinguished Achievement Award from the Texas A&M Association of Former Students (1990), Professional Agricultural Workers of Texas Award (1995), Award in Excellence – Group from Texas A&M (1991), Garden Communicator's Award from the American Association of Nurserymen (1993), Vice-Chancellor's Award of Excellence for Plant Answers (1997), Career Achievement Award from Texas AgriLife Extension Service (2008), Texas Nursery and Landscape Association Region 1 Hall of Fame (2009) and Texas Nursery and Landscape Association Honorary Lifetime Membership (2018).

Dr. Parsons, the developer of the maroon Aggie bluebonnet, is also the father of the commercial Texas bluebonnet seed production industry. His work has led to stable and economical bluebonnet seed sources and prices each year. That heroic work began years prior to the Texas Sesquicentennial in 1986. I was watching it with great interest as his dream (a dream shared with the late Carroll Abbott of Kerrville) was to plant the Texas flag in red, white and blue for that celebration.

In addition to being the originator of what is now the Texas Superstar program, he has also been the driving force behind trialing, introducing and promoting numerous Texas Superstar plant introductions, including Alamo Fire bluebonnets, Bunny Bloom larkspur, Mari-Mums, Laura Bush petunia, dwarf pink Mexican petunia, Henry and Augusta Duelberg salvias, Flare and Moy Grande hibiscus, firebush, Gold Star esperanza and Grandma's Yellow rose. His 30 years' worth of tomato trials have led to dozens of improved varieties and increased production for both industry and homeowners.

Rodney Peterson, President of Peterson Brothers Nursery in San Antonio has said, "My dad and Dr. Parsons formed a trusting partnership which has lasted for more than 30 years and made the Texas nursery industry millions of dollars from sales of superior plant material to satisfied customers."

Bruce Frazier of Dixondale Farms in Carrizo Springs added, "We are the only remaining onion transplant producer of the six or eight producers who existed when we changed our marketing strategy because of the Parsons challenge to my father-in-law. We are now the largest mail-order distributor of onion transplants in the world. Ours is just one family's story of how Dr. Jerry Parsons' contribution during the past 33 years has meant a profitable survival of an agri-business enterprise because of the futuristic vision of diversification by a much-valued public servant."

And I would dare say there will never be a more influential teacher and entertaining horticulturist than Jerry Parsons. He has dominated the mass media with his newspaper column, two radio programs and hundreds of thousands of followers of his *Weekend Gardener* television program.

But as much influence as Jerry has had with plants, his lasting legacy will most likely be through those he has trained, taught and inspired. Dr. Steve George (Professor and Extension Landscape Horticulturist), Dr. Doug Welsh (retired Professor and *Extension Horticulturist Emeritus*), Greg Grant (Smith County CEA-Horticulture), Dr. Calvin Finch (retired CEA-Horticulture and Director of the Texas A&M Water Conservation and Technology Center), and David Rodriguez (Bexar County CEA-Horticulture) all mentored under Dr. Parsons as Bexar County horticulturists in San Antonio. Dozens of other Extension horticulture specialists took note of his great work and patterned their programs after it to one degree or another.

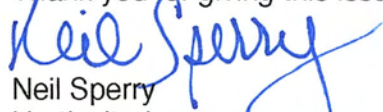
On a personal note, Dr. Parsons has influenced me greatly as well. I have made several trips to San Antonio to see his work first-hand so I could more faithfully report on it to my readers, viewers and listeners. I asked him to speak when I chaired the national convention of the Garden Communicators of America in San Antonio. I asked him to be a regular guest on a weekly gardening television program I did with Bob Phillips of Texas Country Reporter. Dr. Parsons has always been the most popular guest anywhere he has appeared.

I grew up in College Station. My mother was a head librarian on the A&M campus. My *Professor Emeritus* father, Dr. Omer E. Sperry, co-founded the Range and Forestry Department in 1946. Without fully realizing what an advantage it was to be a part of the university community, I attended A&M Consolidated schools with the children of leaders from many departments on the A&M campus. Many of those professors went on to receive high accolades and recognition. So, I do understand and respect those A&M traditions highly.

As I was writing to introduce Dr. Parsons to my readers recently, I realized that there was no A&M *Professor Emeritus* title following his name. I'm not sure how that ever could have happened despite an entire lifetime of outstanding service within the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.

I'm hoping that Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service will allow me to place the name of this most deserving man, Dr. Jerry Parsons of San Antonio, into consideration for the rank of *Professor and Extension Horticulturist Emeritus*. I can think of no one so deserving.

Thank you for giving this issue careful consideration.


Neil Sperry
Horticulturist