



Science
Societies

Roots in unique land lead to life-long career of discovery

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After working in the industry for 42 years, CCA Bruce Palmer, a research agronomist for The McGregor Company, is set to retire in the fall.

Deep roots in his home town, a closed door, thirst for knowledge, and an inquisitive spirit enabled CCA Bruce Palmer to work his way up in an agronomy company only to remain on the ground floor.

In the inland Pacific Northwest, where glaciers carved out deep coulees from basalt rock and then melted into numerous rivers with magnificent waterfalls, there exists wide open fertile land where farmers and ranchers with heart and tenacity sculpt their future alongside the generations that came before.

This unique land visited by Lewis and Clark, attracted dreamers searching for gold. Modern-day gold is seen not in the rivers or under the earth but is produced by the fertile wind-swept rolling hills of the Palouse prairie.

Wheat, once planted and harvested by crews of hundreds of men and thousands of horses and mules, is now grown with the aid of agronomists, armed with the latest science and technology.

Working His Way Up to Remain on the Ground Floor

Deep roots in this historic community and a closed door led Palmer to build his life and career where he was born and raised. Dedicated to assisting his friends and neighbors succeed, Palmer has worked for the same family-owned company, The McGregor Company, throughout his career.

One of the founding families of the area, the McGregors, were sheep ranchers that added wheat to the enterprise. Sparking a partnership with local universities, the McGregors began experimenting with fertilizers and field soil testing in the basement of the family ranch store. Plot tours on the ranch and equipment built to meet their specific needs continued the McGregor tradition of innovation. The ongoing search for products that would increase quality and yields grew to become a separate business. The McGregor Company, with more than 100 years of local history, has its own research and technology division and is the largest independent fertilizer, agricultural, and equipment dealer in the Pacific Northwest.

Palmer didn't grow up in a farming family although his dad did work for a local grain elevator. After high school, Palmer envisioned an engineering career; however, returning servicemen from Vietnam made acceptance into an engineering program nearly impossible. Unable to gain entrance in a college program, he decided to begin working as a delivery and serviceman with The McGregor Company, first delivering fertilizer and chemicals and later working as a custom applicator. With continual learning and hard work, he graduated to sales and then lead agronomist at a retail location. With a passion for new ideas, Palmer has spent the last 22 years as a research agronomist for The McGregor Company.

You could say Palmer started on the ground floor and worked his way up. It might be more fitting to say Palmer expanded his knowledge and expertise, so he could continue to work on the ground floor—discovering, learning, training, and working with customers.

Palmer and the research team at McGregor are contracted to field test new products two to three years before they hit the market. "Field testing enables us to dig into new products to learn how best to use them and address the challenges our customers

face," Palmer says. "We discover the benefits, limitations, and best processes for application to educate and train our staff and customers. We focus on pieces of the puzzle that have potential to meet the needs of local producers."

Challenges on the Horizon

Palmer sees challenges on the horizon for the agriculture industry. He sees an immense need for the development of herbicides with new modes of action to control weeds in dryland agriculture. "Herbicide resistance is a large concern. There are not enough chemically different herbicides to enable simple rotation of crops to answer the weed problem. Stacking of chemicals, mixing selected chemicals in the same tank, will enable more control and require a longer period of time for the weeds to build up resistance to both chemicals simultaneously. Most farmers make decisions based on economics, which I understand. Stacking chemicals can be costly but not as costly as resistance. To combat the resistance problem, we need to support local groups who focus on finding solutions for specific issues and developing new effective controls but also look at innovative new cropping systems that may help as well."

The other challenge Palmer has seen for some time is the lack of young professionals entering the industry. "There are not enough young people attracted to agriculture to replace those of us nearing retirement." Palmer attributes this in part to the volatile nature of agriculture commodities. "Cycles seem to be about every three years—the good years don't last long enough for sustained interest or to get those interested out into the field working." With a shortage of agriculture professionals, Palmer points out that great opportunities exist.

Palmer sees the CCA program as a major benefit for those working in agriculture. "The continual education and self-improvement needed to maintain certification is beneficial since this industry is always changing. Coming out of college or off of farms

gives young people a good base of knowledge. Putting all the pieces together in the field, the desire to improve, learn continually, and a service mindset will make all the difference for a successful career.”

He credits many people for their tireless work and research and passing on the knowledge they gained to others. Betty Klepper, Dick Smiley, Tim Paulitz, Tim Murray, Don Thill, Jim Cook, and others have served as mentors to Palmer.

Working in the industry for 42 years, Palmer has seen vast changes. “When I began, there were very few agriculture products capable of addressing problems and increasing yields. I have seen most of the products and techniques come along. We have improved technology, and it’s more accessible and easier to use. Precision work has increased, and there is more in-depth technology on each acre.”

As he looks toward retirement in the fall, Palmer is looking forward to having time to relax—visiting the grandkids and fishing are at the top of the to-do list. As much as he is looking forward to down time, there is a hint of hesitation in his voice when he speaks of prolonged time without the work he has enjoyed. Retirement for a man who loves discovery and learning may not include extended down time. For Palmer, relaxing may include occasional speaking engagements and helping neighbors find the answers to their problems.

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