



Science  
Societies

# In memoriam: Jim Specht

March 11, 2026

*In Memoriam*

Jim Specht  
1945–2026



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CSSA and ASA Fellow James (Jim) Specht (80) passed away peacefully at home on Feb. 13, 2026. He was born in western Nebraska in 1945 and grew up on a farm that

produced irrigated sugar beets and other crops. His passion for genetics was sparked in 1964 during his undergraduate years at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL), particularly through a genetics course taught by Professor David McGill.

In 1965, he was awarded a Keim Scholarship and became a teaching assistant and also worked as an undergraduate research assistant. He received a B.Sc. degree in Agronomy (1967) and subsequently pursued an M.S. degree in Maize Genetics and Breeding at the University of Illinois, which was interrupted by military service during the Vietnam War. After completing his service, Specht returned to Illinois to finish an M.Sc. degree (1971) and then his Ph.D. degree at UNL (1974), focusing on soybean genetics and physiology. His early research experience at UNL laid the foundation for a 50-year career dedicated to enhancing soybean production through increased yields and water use efficiency and greater profitability for soybean growers.

Dr. Specht's unique breadth and depth of knowledge of plant genetics/genomics, plant physiology, and agronomy, and the interactions among these factors, provided the foundation that supported his long-term research interests. He was a member of a national research team that developed the first soybean genetic map of 20 linkage groups ([Cregan et al., 1999](#)). That genetic map provided the backbone for future developments in genetic marker technology through high-resolution genetic marker maps and finally to assembly of the first complete sequence of the soybean genome ([Schmutz et al., 2010](#)). Those breakthroughs made soybean one of the only major crop species to have a fully sequenced genome and map, which opened the door to further advances in soybean genomics and breeding.

Specht is also widely recognized for his research on the genetic basis of soybean yield response to water—both scarcity (drought) and abundance (irrigation). In two seminal papers (Specht et al., [1986](#), [2001](#)), he was the first to demonstrate that soybean yield

response to differentially applied seasonal water amounts was linear and that genotypes differed in that response. He also showed that canonical water use efficiency (WUE) was negatively associated with yield under drought stress. The genetic basis for yield response to water, and subsequent mapping of regions in the soybean genome that are associated with the traits, were important findings establishing that soybean response to water is a genetically controlled trait and that genes can be identified and manipulated to enhance water productivity for different environments and production systems.

Specht also contributed to enhancing agronomic practices on the farm with a focus on optimizing soybean planting dates and improving soybean water productivity. He was the spokesman for planting soybeans early to achieve higher yields, and almost single-handedly through recommendations based on his research, changed the average soybean planting date in Nebraska and across the Midwest, from mid-May to mid-April. To improve water productivity, he organized a research team to create a website called SoyWater that provided a user-friendly, online venue to help soybean producers implement “just-in-time” irrigation that reduces the amount of water applied without any reduction in yield. The SoyWater website became quite popular after its release in 2010 with more than 1100 registered users across Nebraska and other Corn Belt states.

Over the years, Dr. Specht has presented his research at hundreds of extension field days and scientific conferences. He was a trusted adviser to the Nebraska Soybean Board for many decades and a tireless supporter of undergraduate and graduate education. Many of his students now serve in leadership positions across academia, extension, and industry. All of his students and colleagues remember him for his dedication to scientific rigor, insatiable appetite for knowledge, encyclopedic

command of the scientific literature, and his ability to transmit that knowledge to soybean growers, students, and scientific peers.

Dr. Specht's contributions have been well recognized through [awards and citations](#) too numerous to mention here. Prominent among them are Fellow of CSSA (1989), Fellow of ASA (1988), Fellow of AAAS (1987), ASA Agronomic Achievement Award (1994), CSSA Crop Science Research Award (1996), and Outstanding Achievement Award from the United (States) Soybean Board (2016). Specht was very active in the Societies, serving in numerous ways such as chair of Divisions C-1 (Crop Breeding and Genetics) and C-7 (Genomics, Molecular Genetics, and Biotechnology) and associate editor and technical editor of *Crop Science*.

Specht is preceded in death by parents (Henry and Lydia), a brother Montgomery (Monty), and sister (Melanie). He is survived by his wife Pam of 57 years, brother Terry Specht (Vivian), and numerous nieces and nephews.

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