Science Societies

In memoriam: Johnie N. Jenkins

August 11, 2026

In Memoriam

Johnie N. Jenkins
1934–2026

Dr. Johnie Norton Jenkins, a Fellow and long-time member of CSSA (68 years) and ASA (60 years), died Feb. 9, 2026. He was born Nov. 3, 1934, in Phillips County, Arkansas. He

was valedictorian of his high school class, graduated from the University of Arkansas, and received his M.S. and Ph.D. degrees from Purdue University in Plant Genetics.

He began his career with the USDA and moved to Starkville, MS in 1961, to work in the boll weevil eradication program. He and his collaborators were pioneers in host plant resistance studies that contributed to the eventual eradication of the boll weevil as the major pest of cotton. Jenkins and his research team conducted the world's first field test of Bt cotton, which has been genetically modified to produce a protein toxin that kills the major cotton pests, budworms and bollworms. The safe and reliable test protocols developed by this research team led to rapid commercialization and adoption of this new technology for insect control.

Jenkins went on to become the director of the Crop Science Research Laboratory for the USDA-ARS and an adjunct professor of Crop Science and member of the graduate faculty at Mississippi State University. He retired in 2025 as a Distinguished Senior Research Scientist.

The concept of the "cotton dollar tree" was developed under his guidance and has informed researchers and the industry on how to utilize plant mapping to better manage cotton production across millions of acres.

He was recognized as a leader in the field of cotton research, including the identification of DNA markers and genes for controlling other cotton pests, such as the root knot and reniform nematodes. These and genes to improve cotton fiber quality have been included in cotton germplasm line releases, which have been integral to the cotton industry across the United States.

Jenkins finished his career with nearly 600 publications to his name and 23 book chapters. He was a mentor to hundreds of undergraduates, graduates, and

postdoctoral scientists that span the cotton industry, academia, and government research.

He leaves a legacy of cotton research that propelled Mississippi State to prominence and provided incalculable economic returns to the cotton industry. In addition to CSSA and ASA, he was also an AAAS Fellow and received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Association of Plant Breeders. He was the recipient of the Cotton Genetics Award (1972), the Mobay Cotton Research Award (1985), the ARS Outstanding Scientist Award (1992), the USDA Superior Service Award (1996), and the first Verdant Partners International Crop Genetics Award (2000). He was proud to be inducted into both the USDA-ARS Hall of Fame (2006) and the Cotton Incorporated Hall of Fame (2019). He was awarded both the Meritorious Senior Professional Presidential Rank Award and the Distinguished Presidential Rank Award, the highest awards given to civilian employees of the U.S. government. He received the Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medal in 2025.

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