

A tribute to Bernadine Strik

The berry industry around the world felt the energy, dedication and innovation Dr. Bernadine Strik brought to her work as berry specialist for Oregon State University Extension Service for 34 years. Now we have to say goodbye. Bernadine passed away Friday, April 14, 2023.

Dr. Strik's three-decade career was studded with accolades. Right before her retirement just a year and a half ago, Dr. Strik received the highest honor bestowed by the International Society for Horticultural Science for her industry-changing program on berries.

The prestigious ISHS fellowship is bestowed on scientists who have made a significant impact on horticulture worldwide. Bernadine's innovative research, teaching and Extension outreach had a significant influence on the state's berry industry, which is valued at roughly \$120,000 million a year in Oregon. A similar honor came in 2007 when Dr. Strik received the American Society for Horticultural Science Fellow.

"Bernadine's impact is felt worldwide as an icon of the berry industry, a mentor, and a friend," said Scott Lukas, OSU Extension berry specialist and Dr. Strik's successor after her retirement. "Her infectious energy for horticulture, science and education produced industry-changing advancements and a legacy of knowledge spread across the globe. Her wisdom and passion for horticulture and life will be deeply missed."

But Bernadine's impact wasn't just on the industry. The students who came through her program emerged with passion and the knowledge to start a career.

"In addition to the professional accomplishments, accolades and impact she made, Bernadine was a marvelous colleague, mentor and friend to so many of us," said Ryan Contreras, associate head of the OSU Department of Horticulture and professor in the College of Agricultural Sciences. "She was a giant professionally, but more importantly, she was an amazing person. Bernadine was the genuine article, and we will miss her dearly."

Born in Holland, Strik comes by her love of horticulture honestly. Her paternal grandfather was a vegetable and strawberry grower in west Holland and her maternal grandfather spent his career selling produce at his specialty stores. Her mother and father followed in their footsteps.

When Strik was 3 years old, her family moved to Australia for six years and then settled in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he and Bernadine's mother opened a large retail nursery.

Strik worked in the nursery and grew to love ornamentals. At nearby University of Victoria, where she earned an honors bachelor's degree in botany, Strik did her undergraduate thesis on rhododendron propagation.

She skipped right over a master's degree and went on to earn a doctorate with distinction in horticulture from the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, at the age of 25. Then she was offered her dream job at OSU. In 2022, she told me, "I wanted to teach and do research but also work with growers because that was my background. I wanted to help farmers be more profitable so they can pass their legacy on to their kids."

Blueberry growers recognized their luck in having someone like Dr. Strik by their sides. Dave Brazelton, owner of Fall Creek Farm & Nursery, summed it up this way: "To berry growers in the Pacific

Northwest, Dr. Strik was just Bernadine. That familiarity came from her unique ability for professional yet personal relationships with those in our industry. She was straight talking, to the point, always with that infectious humor. She squeezed every ounce of useful information out of her many research projects. She was the quintessential approachable scientist. Her presentations lifted us, enlightened us and helped us to learn and change. We are better growers and we are a better industry because of Bernadine Strik.”

It’s no wonder. In Strik’s 34 years at OSU, blueberry acreage in Oregon jumped from 1,200 to 15,000 acres with large changes in production systems based on her research. Her landmark 14-year project on organic blueberry production – planting methods, fertilization, mulching, cultivar adaptation, weed control – helped drive an increase in Oregon organic acreage from 2% in 2006 to 20% in 2020 as growers adopted Strik’s research-based production methods to increase their profitability.

“The industry came to me to do organic research in 2006,” Strik told me. “It was important to me that they asked because there were so few organic blueberry growers back then. Despite that, the Oregon Blueberry Commission invested in the research to help the industry.”

Strik’s work didn’t stop with blueberries. She developed research programs on planting density, trellising, pruning, fruit set, fruit quality and planting systems in strawberries, red and black raspberries, blackberries and cranberries. Strik’s research also supported the development of a kiwiberry industry – the smooth-skinned kiwifruit the size of a large grape that can be eaten out of hand.

Outside of work, Bernadine was just as vital and passionate. She and her husband, Neil Bell, were avid travelers, flying off for pleasure and often professionally for collecting plants or sharing information. Sometimes their two daughters, Nicole and Shannon, traveled with them, and they all climbed up challenging mountains all over the world.

Strik met her husband, who retired in 2022 from OSU Extension as a community horticulturist, in Canada in 1990. They married in 1994. Both were studying horticulture and Bell says, “Berries brought us together.”

Berries brought Bernadine together with many, many people who benefited from her wisdom and that made her happy.

“That’s all I ever wanted,” she said in a 2022 conversation. “To make the berry industries and growers more successful and profitable. To know I made a difference is the best way to retire.”

She made a difference. We’ll remember her dedication, passion, intelligence and so much more.

“Our dear friend and colleague, Dr. Bernadine Strik, passed away much too soon after her retirement,” said Bill Braunworth, head of the OSU Department of Horticulture. “She contributed so much to the berry industry and to training students. Her graduate students are contributing professionals worldwide. She made strong service contributions to our college and department, especially in mentoring newer faculty members. For her outstanding scientific contributions, she was highly honored by peers internationally. In addition to being a great scientist, she was a warm and welcoming friend to many and loved and treasured by her family.”

– Kym Pokorny