# University Career Sprouts at Experimental Station

*By Lori Ward Bocher*

Dr. Gayle Worf, University of Wisconsin-Madison plant pathologist for nearly 30 years, has been fascinated with science ever since his childhood days on a farm near an agricultural experimental station in southwestern Kansas.

"Looking back over the years, I know full well that my future was strongly influenced by the proximity to that station because I could rub shoulders with the people who were involved with experimentation and trying to help solve agricultural problems in the area," Gayle recalls.

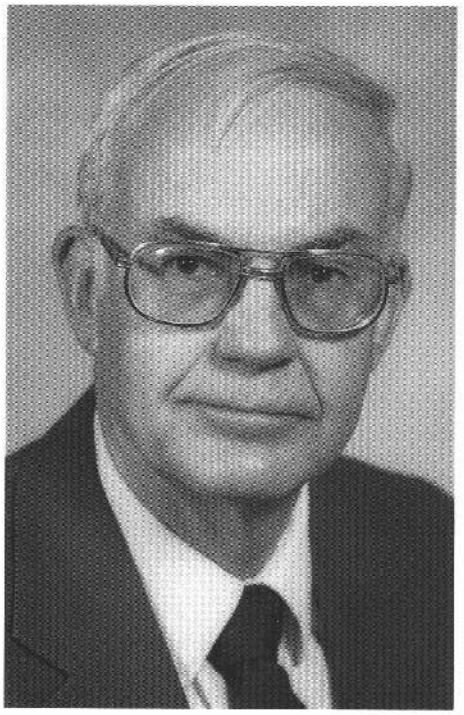
"A lot of the research work was done off the station and on my dad's farm," he continues, referring to their irrigated farm on which the main crops were sugar beets, alfalfa, wheat and sorghum. "So I saw what these people were doing. I could see the magical differences where good resistance had been found to a disease or where treatments for chlorosis changed plants from yellow to green. That was exciting."

So he went to Kansas State University and received a B.S. in agriculture in 1951. For the next four years he was in the military service and was able to earn an M.S. degree in agronomy and plant pathology from KSU. After three years in county extension work, he decided to go back to school before he lost the chance to go under the G.I. bill.

"I picked the University of Wisconsin-Madison because I did a lot of detective work to determine where the best schools were. I didn't know anything about Wisconsin at the time," he says, adding that he was told that the four best schools to consider were Wisconsin, Cornell, Minnesota and the University of California-Davis. He contacted all four universities.

"But I got the royal treatment by people here in Wisconsin, including an air mail response from the department chair and individual correspondence from faculty members," Gayle recalls. "That's why I came here. And I've never regretted it."

After earning his Ph.D. in plant pathology and botany in 1961, he spent



two years on the faculty at Iowa State University where he was the only extension plant pathologist. That's where this Kansas farm boy did his first work with turf and ornamental plants. "Although I had all the other crops to deal with, I ended up spending as much as a third of my time on turf and trees," he recalls.

Being the only plant pathologist at Iowa State left Gayle with too broad an area of responsibility. So when he had a chance to come back to Wisconsin as one of two extension plant pathologists, he took it. "That left me with the agronomic crops and the turf and ornamentals, which was more appealing because no longer did I have to deal with vegetables and fruits," he says. "So I was making progress toward specialization." The move to Wisconsin also gave him a chance to get into research.

Through the years, the UW plant pathology department was able to move toward its long-range goal of adding someone to deal with agronomic plants, so eventually Gayle was able to concentrate on turf and ornamentals.

"We were able to do that until 1987 when the severe cutbacks within extension and the campus caused us to lose one of our positions, so I had to go back to the broader spectrum of responsibilities. But, by that time, I already had carved a niche in the turf and ornamental area and was able to sustain it—but not quite at the level that I wanted to nor to what it deserved," Gayle says.

Worf has had responsibilities in research, extension and the classroom. He enjoys the variety and believes it's impossible to assign a certain percentage of time to each responsibility. "I don't quite know where my applied research in the field ends as research and begins as outreach," he says. "Sometimes research becomes demonstrations, and research becomes newsletter information or material that we can share with the turf and tree people during our winter meetings."

In the classroom, his one regret is that turf and ornamental students are not offered a course that deals with disease problems specific to those crop areas. "We get the information to them in different ways. But it would be fun to have the opportunity and time to dig into these diseases in some detail with them," Gayle says.

"There's so much for a person to learn and so little time to do it," he adds. "We want to make sure that our students learn the things on campus that will equip them to be efficient and effective learners from that time forward.

"I heard a statement the other day that I think is absolutely true, even though it was said in jest," Gayle continues. "'Four years of college never hurt anyone as long as the person was willing to learn something after he or she graduated.' I think that's very true."

Worf believes that summer internships are one of the turf program's greatest strengths. "The classroom experience is one component. But the internship gives students a chance to extend their learning opportunities and

experience, see them from a different perspective. It makes the classroom exercise more meaningful.

"And, with the internship, students don't have to learn all of the important innuendos and nuances of the job in the classroom," Gayle continues, "They need to learn basic soils, basic horticulture, basic plant pathology and basic entomology in the classroom. But details they have to pick up through other mechanisms."

Gayle thanks the people in the turf industry who are "willing to take these young people on and give them the extra time and TLC—and sometimes a kick—that they need."

When it comes to turf research and management, Gayle has seen "an absolutely profound change" in his 30 years as a plant pathologist. "If Rip Van Winkle had seen what was going on in the 60's and then awoke in the 90's, he would not recognize turf as the same entity," he says.

Gayle believes that this "profound change" is most prominent in two areas: the intensification of all sectors of turf management; and the greater sophistication of turf managers.

"An example of the intensification on golf courses is the kind of equipment that's available today to make it possible to cultivate and manicure the crop in the fashion that it is," Gayle explains, referring to aerating equipment, lightweight mowers and sophisticated irrigation equipment.

"I don't know what the numbers would have been, but I bet less than 10 percent of our golf courses were irrigating fairways in the 60's," he continues. "Today, not only are fairways irrigated, but a large percentage of courses have highly sophisticated, computer controlled equipment that does a much better job.

"At the same time there have been more demands placed on the product," Gayle points out. "The answer to that has not only been the equipment, but I see a vast change—an absolutely unbelievable change—in the sophistication of the golf course superintendents, the evolution of the professional mind. The superintendents today are much more knowledgeable. As a group they're much more bent upon—bentgrass pun not intended—doing a better job.

"Coupled right in with that is the tremendous pressure that all of us are feeling to provide that superior product, but at the same time do it within the realm of concerns about our environment," Gayle continues.

"If I had any regrets about leaving at this particular time, it's that this is the dawn of opportunity for a new era of research with the O.J. Noer Turfgrass Research Center," he adds. "I can't help but feel that properly constructed projects will be awfully important to help the citizenry accept what turf offers in the way of benefits to the environment. But we also are going to have to be more knowledgeable about what, in fact, we are doing to the environment.

"I'm confused at the moment with the different reports that I see as to what does or does not move through turf and into the groundwater," Gayle admits. That's just one example of what has to shake out through research over time.

"And what about dislodgeable residues—concerns that the products we use to maintain turf rub off and come in contact with people. Is this a problem?" Gayle asks. "My premise is, and there's a limited amount of work that backs me up, that this is not a concern except in one's mind. But we need to have the kind of information that can satisfy those questions at a little better level than we have now. These get to be more difficult kinds of research projects to undertake."

When he speaks of leaving turfgrass research, there are two reasons. The first came in 1990 when Worf was named Acting Associate Dean for Extension Programs. Why the move to the Dean's office? "I suppose the easiest answer is that somebody had to do it," Gayle answers.

In this position, Worf serves as an interface between the Cooperative Extension Service and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. He also looks for ways to foster CALS outreach programs.

The second reason will come in July of 1992 when Gayle retires from the University. This retirement originally was scheduled for July of 1991, then moved back to September of 1991, then to July of 1992.

Gayle and his wife, Mary, had planned to retire together; she retired this year after 26 years of teaching 4th grade. Now they will have to wait another year before they can share retirement. "We love to travel, camp, fish," Gayle says. "We love to bowl. We're looking forward to participating in Elderhostels, taking care of the grandkids, or letting them take care of us."

The Worf's have two married sons, both living in Nashville. Between the two sons there are six grandchildren, including two sets of twins—one set in each family.

Gayle's final words for this Personality Profile interview put the column in perspective and says a lot about the caliber of this issue's "personality".

"You've given me a rare opportunity to just sit here for an hour and talk about myself," he comments. "You've given me an opportunity to feel very important for a little while. I appreciate that."