



Educator PROfile

Dr. Ted Whitwell

By Ellen Vincent, Clemson University Environmental Landscape Specialist

Ted Whitwell grew up on a small farm in Tennessee. His father grew cotton, corn, soybeans, pigs, and cattle. "It was a lot of fun. It was a lot of work" he remembers. He refers to the past as ancient history and remembers how weedy the crops were and all the time they spent cultivating and hand hoeing the weeds. Then, with the emergence of herbicides during the 1960s Whitwell became fascinated by the concept of selective weed control and he attended evening seminars (at age 12) sponsored by Extension and chemical companies to learn more.

Whitwell attended University of Tennessee at Martin, a small college located in the northwest section of the state. He earned a B.S. in plant science from University of Tennessee then decided to continue at Oklahoma State. Whitwell had visited his brother-in-law there and liked it well enough to enroll. He earned an M.S. in agronomy and a Ph.D. in agriculture and applied science (weed control). Roundup had just been labeled for use, so Whitwell conducted his research on uptake and translocation of Roundup in Bermudagrass.

His first job after graduating was at Auburn University in Northern Alabama. It was an extension research job and he was responsible for 30 counties along the Tennessee River and Smokey Mountains. It was during this time that he became exposed to and interested in ornamental nurseries. He remembers these people were "great folks" and he wanted to do research that could benefit them. He transferred to the experiment station and began learning what has become his lifetime work: managing weeds in ornamental nurseries, with a focus also on environmental issues. He was able to engage in all this productive work within the confines of the beautiful Tennessee River Valley.

It was while watching a football game on television in 1983 that he first heard of Clemson University. The game stuck with him because a coach from Ohio State came onto the field and slugged a Clemson player. In 1984 he heard of a job opening at Clemson that involved teaching as well

as research. He was drawn by the prospect, joined the Clemson faculty, and is content that he made all the right moves. His wife Kathy and their six children prospered in the SC upstate as well.

By 1998 he became chair of the horticulture department. "Nobody else wanted it" he claims. This position allowed him to spend more time advising students, a task he values and has been recognized for. "Helping people succeed" is what motivates him and perhaps explains the success he experiences with students, staff, and faculty alike. Ted Whitwell served as undergraduate advisor to Sarah White who is now employed as Nursery Extension Specialist in the Environmental Horticulture department. "He genuinely wanted me to succeed" she remembers. "He opened doors for me to enter the Ph.D. environmental toxicology program." White also recalls how approachable and supportive Whitwell was. "He came out into the field to help me take samples" she recounts, "Now how many professors of his position would take the time to do that?" She, like other students of Whitwell, claim they felt important, that he was always approachable and willing to teach or mentor them. In addition, White says, "But he lets you make your own choices and mistakes."

Whitwell's teaching style has changed over the years. "In the beginning" he explains, "it was all about subject matter and involved students memorizing things. Now it's all about problem solving. My goal is for them to have the resources to solve problems when they are out in the work place." He equips his weed science students with ample resources in the form of a 400 page notebook filled with research, charts, graphs, definitions, and fact sheets. His notebook provides students with the resources they need to solve problems in the field. He has also peppered his classroom lecture with more hands-on activities over the years. "Students respond well to experiential learning" he claims and carrying weeds to class to teach plant weed identification is one way he acknowledges this.

Whitwell notices that the types of



problems in weed science have changed over the years. Chemical responses to weed management used to be the major focus, but now Whitwell approaches the subject with a holistic view. "You have to look at cultural and biological implications and develop plans to address the issues that are long term instead of short term."

Whitwell stepped down from the chair position in 2008 and stepped up to a new position as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the College of Agriculture, Forestry, and Life Sciences. He agreed to the new appointment on the condition that he be allowed to teach the weed science course. With this new move Whitwell is able to help even more people succeed. He is working to establish relations with the technical colleges, learning how to recruit students to increase diversity, handling student and faculty grievances, and working closely with student support services staff, to name a few of his new duties. His long term goal for the future is to turn the 400 page notebook used in the weed science class into a published textbook.