

The Fruits of His Labor

By Joan Paris

University of Massachusetts officials honored our own hometown hero, Jesse L. Rice of Wilbraham, at a luncheon on January 6 for his contributions in the Massachusetts Fruit Growers' Association. Rice was awarded a lifetime member certificate in 2003 and was an original research center director and founder making Cold Spring Orchard a working fruit farm and research center more than 40 years ago. Officials gathered to celebrate the original founders and reveal commemorative plaques in the orchard's Founder's Garden. The Belchertown orchard is a farm, roadside stand, and a research facility for fruit growers and agricultural students.

Rice, 89, is the only surviving member from the 1962 board and the only one of those original research center directors still active at the orchard. "This has been a tremendous asset to the food industry, and really, it's the best facility in New England," he said. "Other states don't have this sort of a setup where they can do their own experimenting with different varieties, as they do here."

University of Massachusetts landscape architecture students are working to complete a commemorative garden honoring Cold Spring Orchard's founders and contributors. The garden honors the late Franklin W. Southwick, professor of Pomology, and the Massachusetts Fruit Growers Association, which bought the orchard in 1962 and donated it to the university. Other honorees include: the late Jesse A. Taft, an orchard adviser and teacher; entrepreneur Jack Blais of Framingham, a trust fund supporter and fruit grower, and the late Ronald J. Prokopy, a university professor of entomology lauded for his developments in integrated pest management.

Officials also unveiled a plaque for the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture, for financially supporting much of Prokopy's and the orchard's work. Michael Davidsohn, a lecturer in the university's Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning, led five graduate students in designing the garden, which will be completed within a year.

According to Davidsohn, "We tried to take a lot of the functions here and incorporate them into the design. The completed garden will feature a bluestone patio surrounded by an arbor, a gravel picnic area, and benches inspired by apple crates. Perennials will fill the area, including day lilies, lavender, and primrose, snow-in-summer, and bearded iris, hens and chicks, and Johnny jump-ups."

Since June 1962, many students have learned fruit-growing practices, and many commercial orchardists have observed and adopted state-of-the-art management systems. The focus of the research from the beginning to the present has been to find better ways to grow fruit in Massachusetts, including the testing of new varieties, the evaluation of more efficient horticultural techniques, and the development of more environmentally friendly management approaches.

The UMass Cold Spring Orchard, a research facility of UMass Amherst, is a place to buy delicious fruit, and is a great spot to enjoy a spectacular view of the Holyoke Mountain Range. Located at the site of the spring that gave Belchertown its original name—Cold Spring—the orchard is on property that was once Hanifin Farm/Bay State Dairy Farm, at 391 Sabin Street in Belchertown. The UMass Cold Spring Orchard Store is open weekdays only (M-F, 8:30-3) with apples, cider (limited availability) and butternut squash.

Founded in 1894, Rice Fruit Farm, Inc. 757 Main Street in town is an 87-acre farm. The farm stand, managed by Amy Rice, is open year round, seven days a week. You can enjoy local apples, peaches, nectarines, maple syrup, honey, jams and jellies, cider, eggs, dairy products, candy, crafts, baked goods, coffee/tea.