Remembering "Doc" Childers: 1911 - 2011

Dick Meister
Chairman Emeritus and Editor-At-Large, MeisterMedia

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The "grand old man of horticulture" is gone. Dr. Norman Franklin Childers was 100 years old when he passed away on April 24, 2011 after a lifetime of achievement educating, training, and researching fruit growers and fruit scientists.

Childers was a product of the land grant college system and its greatest supporter and defender. He is one of a remarkable line of leaders who devoted their lives to fruit science, and whose ranks are being thinned as more funding goes to the new sciences of biotechnology, genomics, and nanotechnology. He fought against the decrease in funding for workers involved in the personal and practical development of the art and science of horticulture; continually emphasizing that on-site research, training, and help are still vitally needed.

He was energetic, hardly ever took a vacation, and not only was a leader in applied research, but also got great enjoyment in working in the orchards with growers.

He had the genes of an editor. His book, *Modern Fruit Science*, was translated into four languages and went through many editions. When his *The Strawberry* book sold out, he brought out a new edition. His *The Blueberry* book is a classic and has stimulated a growing blueberry industry across the country. He also edited *Fruit Nutrition*, *The Peach*, and *The Pear*, and was editor of the Proceedings for the Florida State Horticultural Society for 12 years.

Childers was born in Moscow,

ID, where his father was head of the Soil Science Department at the University of Idaho. His father was also one of the first county agricultural Extension agents, and Norm followed in his footsteps, getting his B.S. and Master's degrees at the University of Missouri, and a Ph.D. in Pomology under Professor A.J. Heinicke at Cornell University.

After spending four years on tropical ag research in Puerto Rico, he moved to Rutgers University in New Jersey in 1947, where for 18 years he headed the Horticulture Department. After retirement in 1981, he moved to Gainesville and the University of Florida where he was adjunct professor for many years. Even as an adjunct professor at Florida, he was able to create enthusiasm for the practice of horticulture. He started a course for all students called Growing Fruits for Fun and Profit and at one time had more than 400 registered from all over the university.

In the 70s, Childers, who believed in getting out and seeing people and places, took a sabbatical and visited many former students in a trip around the world. A byproduct of that trip was that he was able to bring new technology and stimulated new fruit production programs, particularly blueberries and strawberries in South Africa, and peaches in southern Romania.

He won numerous awards, and his favorite association was the American Society for Horticultural Science, where he missed only three meetings in 65 years. He has endowed awards for horticulture students and grad students to encourage people to get into horticulture and homology in order to keep the art and science and practice available to everyone. He often said he would like to be remembered for the students he taught and trained and supported with scholarship awards and endowments. He is proud of the fact that these efforts will continue as he provided for them in his estate plan.

When asked what the secret was to his longevity, he said, "There is no secret. I think the reason is that I have kept busy. No sitting around.

Editors Note: Doc Childers was one of my fist mentors as a graduate student at Rutgers University, Cook College. I began my graduate studies in the Department of Horticulture on a partial scholarship from Gerber Baby Foods with Drs. Hough and Bailey. Money was tight and Doc gave me work moving and organizing all his published books, like *Modern Fruit Science* and *Fruit Nutrition*. Doc published his own books and filled the orders. He provided tremendous mentorship, guidance and support during my studies and encouraged me to take my first career job as a Rutgers Cooperative Extension Agent. As a grad student, Doc encouraged us to attend American Society of Horticultural Science meetings. I chauffeured Doc and the other students in one of his old, big, black Cadillacs that he loved to own. I attended my first International Dwarf Fruit Tree Association Meeting with Doc Childers and Ernie Christ in NH in the summer of 1978. What an introduction to this fine organization that made for me! Traveling with Doc and Ernie jumpstarted my 33-year career as a fruit extension agent. I will always be grateful to Doc for his wisdom, guidance, encouragement and humor. I know thousands of others will as well. -- Win Cowgill

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