



Thomas Lawrence Mellichamp, "Dr. M"
October 4, 1948 - September 12, 2022



Our community has lost its ultimate "Plant Whisperer", Dr. Larry Mellichamp. Botanist, teacher, mentor, author, and creator, Larry had a phenomenal knowledge of the lives and growth of plants. He broke ground at the highest levels of botanical knowledge, and yet, also among the humblest of home gardens. He could convey to anyone which plant should go to which site and what that plant needed to flourish. Everything he did in his life led to this ability.

As a child he was always digging in the dirt - even tasting it! As a teenager, on his uncle's farm in South Carolina, he worked in the crops, cutting and hanging tobacco. At his grandmother's home in Lamar, South Carolina, he helped her with arranging flowers. Bama was the local florist, and her side yard had interesting and unusual plants. Larry was influenced by his Daddy who was an organic gardener before it was "a thing".

Larry is a local boy (made good), though he was born in Pittsburgh, PA, when his father was in art school. Back in Charlotte, he played for countless hours in the neighborhood pond, losing himself in observing wildlife and collecting water samples. He had a microscope at home and explored the hidden micro-world within that pond. After attending East Mecklenburg High School, he attended the new University of North Carolina at Charlotte, graduating with a Bachelor's degree in the second graduating class. At UNC Charlotte he was quickly recognized by his biology professors as someone special, and he was given responsibility for the small teaching greenhouse and planted some of the first plants in what would later become the Botanical Gardens. He took field trips to the mountains and to the Green Swamp, where he first acquainted himself with carnivorous plants. This was the spark of the beginning of a life's work with these amazing plants.

From there he went north to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor for his PhD in Biology, working with the renowned fern expert, Dr. Herb Wagner. By observing the dynamic Dr. Wagner, Larry's teaching skills came naturally, and he shone in leading lab classes and was given the opportunity to teach continuing education classes, as well. He won the graduate student of the year award and was considered the go-to teaching assistant in his department.

On weekends there in Ann Arbor, he "lived" at the Botanical Gardens, learning behind the scenes with their gardeners, giving lessons and tours of the conservatory, adding layer upon layer to his understanding of the world of plants. At the University of Michigan, he met his lifelong partner of 48 years, Audrey. They created a unique team and shared their growing passion for the natural world with students and other adults. They explored the United States

and the world together. Their love blossomed from officemates through lab partners to summers at the University of Michigan Biological Station in Pellston, MI. Exploring the dunes, bogs, and the entire North Woods was like heaven to them.

Fate and talent conspired to bring Larry back to Charlotte. In 1976 he was offered an assistant professor position at his *alma mater*, UNC Charlotte. Here, over 39 years, he would become so much more than a talented professor and beloved teacher. Here he would take the reins of a ten acre campus garden and transform it into a living laboratory, a beautiful garden, an incredibly diverse collection of plants from the Carolinas and around the world, and a green heart from which botanists, teachers, gardeners, public leaders, and citizen naturalists would grow and go on to influence countless others.

Larry was a generous, curious, and engaged teacher, taking time to talk to and guide his students in their lives. He was not just a mentor, he was “the mentor’s mentor”. He could talk with anyone - young, old, rich, poor. No question, no matter how many times he had heard it was too small, and many times he responded with “great question!”

Throughout his life he traveled the world to see rare plants, visiting Costa Rica, Mexico, Borneo, South Africa, Australia, China, and Madagascar (with daughter, Suzanne). Not many naturalists had his uncanny knack to find rare plants in the wild. He knew where they should live - their habitat and their associates, and what lived with them. Not only a respected field botanist, he also saw the potential of particular wild plants to grace our gardens. He shared these plants with nurserymen and many are now garden favorites. He had the vision of cross-breeding and promoting the cultivation of carnivorous *Sarracenia* pitcher plants and spent years of solo and collaborative work to bring it to fruition. He was the first to patent a *Sarracenia* hybrid.

As the Director of the Botanical Gardens at UNC Charlotte, Larry brought the world of plants to people. His vision and drive to grow and share rare and fascinating plants, resulted in many “firsts” for Charlotte: a diverse orchid collection of species and hybrids, South African (and other desert) succulent room, carnivorous plant bogs, a dinosaur’s garden with a life-size *Deinonychus* sculpture, and the first blooming of a Titan Arum in the Carolinas. His expertise ran both broad and deep. He was a central figure in the North Carolina Native Plant Society and he understood the importance of our native flora for everyone, not just experts. Leading his Botanical Garden team, he created a first-of-its-kind native plant garden specifically designed for homeowners, and a native plants certificate program to educate and inspire the public.

His popular books and talks further extended his reach and influence: *The Winter Garden*, *Bizarre Botanicals*, *Native Plants of the Southeast*, and *The Southeast Native Plant Primer*. As a professional taxonomist, he wrote the scientific treatises of dozens of species for the *Flora of North America*. He worked tirelessly for what he loved and his efforts did not go unrecognized. He was most proud of winning the Association of Southeastern Biologists Teaching award, the Tom Dowd Award from the Cullowhee Native Plant Conference, the International Carnivorous Society Lifetime Achievement award, and the prestigious Flora Caroliniana award given for enthusiasm and service to the preservation, restoration, and appreciation of the natural world.

Larry loved and appreciated his family and was most proud of his daughter, Suzanne, and her ability to create natural images in clay. Her calla lily and magnolia flower pieces were cherished by him.

At 73, Larry lived almost three years beyond his “expiration date” for his diagnosis of bile duct cancer. He is preceded in death by his father, William “Bill” Louis Mellichamp and his mother, Martha Thomas Mellichamp. He leaves his wife, Audrey, and daughter Suzanne; sister Judy (children Jason, Jenna), brother-in-law Jerry, and sister Joanne (children April & Sarah).

Memorial donations may be sent to the Foundation of the Carolinas for the “Mellichamp Garden Staff Enrichment Fund”, 220 North Tryon Street, Charlotte, NC 28202. For bank transfer instructions contact donorrelations@ffc.org or 704-973-4529. All are invited to share memories and photos of Larry at <https://link.inmemori.com/mDPxXH> . A public memorial service will be planned for October at the UNC Charlotte Botanical Gardens. Look for an announcement on their website, gardens.uncc.edu.