



Dr. Craig Yencho receives 2024 O. Max Gardner Award

NC State University researcher has cultivated community, economic stability through groundbreaking sweetpotato research

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RALEIGH – Dr. Craig Yencho, an NC State University professor whose research has influenced sweetpotato cultivation across the world, has been named the recipient of the 2024 Oliver Max Gardner Award.

Established by the will of former North Carolina Gov. O. Max Gardner, the award recognizes faculty who have “made the greatest contribution to the welfare of the human race.” The Gardner award is the highest honor the Board of Governors confers on faculty and is the only award for which all faculty members across the 17 campuses are eligible. It was presented to Yencho at today’s Board meeting.

Yencho is the William Neal Reynolds Distinguished Professor in the Department of Horticultural Science at NC State’s College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. An internationally acclaimed plant breeder, he has studied the sweetpotato and improved its standing as a valuable crop that is resilient in adverse growing conditions.



In 2005, Yencho introduced the Covington sweetpotato to the world — a breakthrough variety known for its high yield, flavor, nutritional value and appearance. The Covington sweetpotato now commands nearly 90 percent of North Carolina’s crop production and 20 percent of sweetpotato crop acreage nationwide. Since its inception, the Covington has generated nearly \$4 billion in farm gate revenue for North Carolina farmers, earning its place as one of the most impactful varieties ever introduced by NC State.

“Dr. Yencho’s work in sweetpotato research not only helps drive economic prosperity for our state, it also helps fortify the health of populations across the globe,” said NC State Chancellor Randy Woodson. “His research is a shining example of work that improves the world around us, and we congratulate him on this well-deserved, prestigious honor.”

“The agricultural revolution is a miracle of modern civilization,” said UNC System President Peter Hans. “And it was made possible by brilliant researchers like Dr. Yencho, whose discoveries have wrought better crop yields, better nutrition, and a better life for humanity. It takes a special kind of scholar to look at a sweetpotato and think, ‘I’ll bet I can make that stronger and tastier.’ That’s exactly the generous ambition we want in our faculty.”

Beyond his impact here in North Carolina and the United States, Yencho is committed to enhancing the global welfare of humanity, especially in regions grappling with food insecurity and nutritional deficiencies. He has bred sweetpotato varieties for tropical and subtropical conditions prevalent in developing nations and has directed cutting-edge research that helped elevate sweetpotato crop standards in Sub-Saharan Africa. This contributes significantly to economic stability and fortifies food security in the area, particularly for women. Estimates show that more than 10 million households have reaped the benefits of biofortified sweetpotatoes over the past decade.

Yencho serves as a professor and mentor for new generations of plant breeders, building a legacy as one of the most influential agricultural researchers of our time. Through hard work and leadership, he has curated and led an exceptional team of innovators at NC State. These scientists share a core value of confronting challenges to enhance society through crop improvement, economic prosperity and the fostering of healthy populations.

“Dr. Yencho is a great example of the leadership and world-changing research provided every day by the outstanding faculty at our public universities,” said UNC Board of Governors Chair Randy Ramsey. “His sweetpotato crops have made a meaningful, nutritious and delicious difference in the lives of many. We thank him for his decades of work and congratulate him on this award.”