



National Association for Plant Breeding PRIVATE SECTOR PLANT BREEDING IMPACT AWARD 2025

MARK J. MESSMER
CoverCress Inc.
Lake Saint Louis, MO

The 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding (NAPB) Private Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award is Dr. Mark J. Messmer of CoverCress Inc. This Award recognizes an individual whose accomplishments as a scientist in the private sector have had extraordinary impact in the field of plant breeding in areas such as germplasm development, cultivar release, technological innovation, and leadership.

As stated in his nomination package: “Mark Messmer’s career and contributions to plant breeding are truly extraordinary, embodying the criteria for the NAPB Plant Breeding Impact Award through his advancements in germplasm development, cultivar release, technological innovation, and leadership. His work has not only propelled our field forward but has also made a significant positive impact on the planet and its people.”

Messmer’s first exposure to plant breeding was as a student hourly worker in Dr. Herb Ohm’s wheat and oat breeding programs at Purdue University. After graduating with a BS in Agronomy in 1979, he completed his MS and PhD degrees in in Plant Breeding and Genetics at the University of Illinois under Dr. Bob Lambert in 1983.

Messmer quickly started his industry career in 1983 at Garst Seed Company as a corn breeder, opening a new breeding station in Wood River, Nebraska. He led the development of many of Garst’s initial proprietary hybrid parent inbreds while in Nebraska and subsequently at Slater Iowa.

As one colleague observed: “Mark’s technical achievements are matched by his exceptional leadership and vision for organizational culture. He has fostered an environment of collaboration, transparency, innovation, and respect, significantly impacting the professional development and growth of countless individuals within our organization. Personally, Mark’s mentorship has been a

cornerstone of my own professional journey, guiding me through challenges and encouraging the exploration and application of my strengths.”

Messmer rose to Research Director at Garst, and after 14 years with the company, left in 1997 to join Monsanto as Global Hybrid Wheat Research Director with their HybriTech operating unit. After 18 months in this position, Messmer was asked to lead the integration of Monsanto’s North American Corn Breeding program acquisitions into a single team.

From early 1999 until his retirement from Monsanto in mid-2014, Messmer led or co-led Monsanto’s North America Corn Breeding program. After his initial retirement, along with some Monsanto colleagues, Messmer began a program in 2015 to develop Field Pennycress as a winter oilseed crop with a small startup company called Arvegenix.

Arvegenix evolved to become the company that is now CoverCress Inc., where Messmer has focused on establishing a sustainable and successful CoverCress® field breeding and testing program, starting with broadly collected wild accessions of Field Pennycress. He has spent extensive time in the field doing observations and agronomic learning to advance the viability of CoverCress® as a commercial crop.

The basic breeding program Messmer started at CoverCress Inc. ten years ago has now, with the help of gene editing, grown into an effective modern breeding operation that has supplied products supporting initial and ongoing commercialization efforts. Over the past two years, Messmer has transitioned to an advisor role for CoverCress Inc. on their Scientific Advisory Committee.

In summary, another colleague concluded: *“When you look at Marl’s career spanning 40 years with expertise in two crops and countless encounters with colleagues and mentees who have branched out to other companies, it’s truly comparable to a stone that is thrown in a river and causes ripples through the water-he’s touched many lives all the way from a first-year researcher to farmers in their tractors in their fields.”*



Dr. Mark J. Messmer, CoverCress Inc., the 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding Public Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award.



Dr. Mark J. Messmer, CoverCress Inc., the 2025 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding Public Sector Plant Breeding Impact Award at a Field Pennycress trial.



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