



National Association for Plant Breeding ANN MARIE THRO FRIENDS OF PLANT BREEDING AWARD 2024



RITA MUMM
University of Illinois
Urbana IL

The 2024 recipient of the National Association for Plant Breeding Ann Marie Thro Friends of Plant Breeding is Dr. Rita Mumm, Professor Emerita, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL. Mumm has had a long career in agricultural seed product development in the private and public sectors since earning a PhD degree in Genetics and Plant Breeding at the University of Illinois. A trailblazer in utilizing technological innovations and genomics-assisted approaches to optimize development of improved cultivars, she has contributed to agricultural food system advancements through the seed industry, academia, and international development, and supported plant breeders around the world. She holds several US and European patents.

Mumm's current roles are mainly focused on preparing the next generation of crop improvement scientists, especially in Africa, to meet the world's demands for nutritious food. She serves as Director of Capacity Development and Mobilisation for the African Orphan Crop Consortium (AOCC), a consortium of over 40 organizations founded in 2011 to end chronic hunger and malnutrition and eradicate stunting in Africa. Mumm also directs the African Plant Breeding Academy, the professional development arm of the AOCC. To date, the Academy has empowered 151 African plant breeders from 28 countries (90% PhDs, 40% women) to utilize genomics-assisted approaches and tools in the development of improved crop varieties with the traits farmers want and consumers need. In addition, the Academy launched a first-of-its-kind course in the how-to of genome editing and has trained 21 scientists from 9 African countries, linking them with AOCC plant breeders to have traits incorporated into improved, farmer-preferred varieties.

As her nomination package states: “Rita is passionate about Plant Breeding Education, that is, preparing the next generation of crop improvement scientists and supporting the current global workforce through continuing education to address food and nutritional insecurity and eradicate stunting due to malnutrition.”

Mumm has contributed to crop improvement and the global scientific community in other ways as well: Instructor in the UC Davis Plant Breeding Academy in the US and Europe; Member of the CIMMYT Board of Trustees; serving on several Scientific Advisory Boards; and Advisor to the seed industry as Principal of the consulting firm, GeneMax Services. She led the education and training component of the USAID Soybean Innovation Lab for 8 years, primarily supporting curriculum enhancement and faculty/program development at the West Africa Centre for Crop Improvement, University of Ghana. In 2008 Rita helped establish the Illinois Plant Breeding Center at the University of Illinois, aiming to raise awareness of the plant breeding profession amidst the shortage of US plant breeders, and served as Director through 2012. Rita’s research as a professor at the University of Illinois focused on approaches to optimize the cultivar development pipeline, using maize as a model. Rita remains on faculty as a professor emerita.

Rita was the first President of the National Association of Plant Breeders (NAPB) as it sprang from the Plant Breeding Coordinating Committee (PBCC) in 2011. She served PBCC and NAPB from 2008 through 2016 in various roles, including Chair of the PBCC’s Subcommittee on Education and Training of Plant Breeders and Chair of the NAPB Awards Panel.

In summary, as a colleague observes: Dr. Rita Mumm has a deep understanding of both private and public sector plant breeding. This background has been invaluable in her important community service and leadership activities. With her career in both the public and private sector, she is the right person at the right time to receive this honor.”



Dr. Rita Mumm, University of Illinois, recipient of the 2024 National Association for Plant Breeding Ann Marie Thro Friends of Plant Breeding Award. Mumm is 2nd from right with 10 graduates of the CRISPR Course Class I and 8 instructors in Oct 2023 at International Centre for Research in Agroforestry, Nairobi, Kenya.



Rita Mumm, University of Illinois, recipient of the 2024 National Association for Plant Breeding Ann Marie Thro Friends of Plant Breeding Award, 2nd from right, at Syngenta-Delta Pine Land cotton tour in 2004.



Rita Mumm (right) winner of the 2024 National Association for Plant Breeding Ann Marie Thro Friends of Plant Breeding Award, at CIMMYT Kiboko, Kenya facility for doubled haploid maize production in Oct 2019