

Robert Armine Conover, 1916-1981

R. B. Marlatt



Robert A. Conover, Professor and Plant Pathologist at the University of Florida's Agricultural Research and Education Center in Homestead, was killed in an automobile accident near Homestead on December 24, 1981. Aged 65, Dr. Conover was actively engaged in research on diseases of papaya and other crop plants. He was directing an intensive papaya breeding program that is successfully producing crosses resistant to the viruses that have hampered growth of the industry for decades.

Robert Conover was born in Ursa, Illinois, in 1916. His education included a B.S. degree from Culver-Stockton College in Canton, Missouri, in 1939; an M.S. in 1941 at the State University of Iowa; and a Ph.D. degree in plant pathology from the University of Illinois in 1947.

During World War II, he served in the Medical Corps of the U.S. Army, where he gained experience assisting with surgical operations in army hospitals. He retained an interest in medicine for the rest of his life and was pleased to be Chairman of our Center's Safety Committee and to serve as Safety Coordinator.

After receiving the Ph.D., Bob moved to Homestead, Florida, and began his career as Associate Professor (Plant Pathologist) with the University of Florida's Subtropical Agricultural Experiment Station. One of his first interests was the papaya virus disease that he studied for the rest of his professional life. His keen powers of observation and diagnostic ability enabled him to work effectively at an outlying experiment station, where advising local farmers and devising controls for diseases in the surrounding fruit and vegetable fields was of major importance for many years. He soon discovered potato virus X and Y in local tomatoes and began selecting and breeding tomatoes and pole beans as steps in controlling their diseases and increasing yields. His observations also laid the groundwork for prevention of a physiological disease of lime fruits, referred to as styler-end rot. His wide-ranging interests also included working on diseases of cantaloupes, avocados, and poinsettias. In recognition of his contributions to Florida's horticulture, Bob was chosen the "Outstanding Scientist of 1981" by the Florida Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association.

Bob became closely involved with the agricultural community

and people of Homestead and Dade County. He joined service clubs, societies, and the Homestead Presbyterian Church and quickly developed lifelong friendships.

These social contacts and evident professional skills led to appointment as Head of the experiment station in 1964. He returned to full-time research in 1975.

When Bob Conover arrived at the Subtropical Station, it consisted of six scientists, an office, and two laboratory buildings on 120 acres of partially tilled, rocky soil plus an additional acreage of marl. When he resigned from administration there were 13 scientists, several more buildings, and 190 acres, most of them in production. During the period in administration, he continued doing some research because he particularly enjoyed solving plant disease problems that required field work.

After resuming full-time research and with the help of sizable USDA grants, Bob Conover's penchant for plant breeding kept him happily busy selecting papayas that successfully resisted the locally devastating virus diseases. Breeding sweet potatoes for disease resistance also occupied some of his time. During his career he published at least 75 articles about this research. Bob participated in several international programs. He was Consultant to the Virgin Islands Agricultural Experiment Station and coordinated a National Science Foundation International Symposium on Virus Diseases of Fruits and Vegetables, which was held in Homestead in 1979.

Robert Conover was dedicated to the science of plant pathology and agriculture and to science in general. He was a member of the American Phytopathological Society, including the Southern and Caribbean Divisions, American Society for Horticultural Science and its Tropical Region Section, American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Institute of Biological Sciences and the Smithsonian Institute. Bob served on the Executive and other committees of the Florida State Horticultural Society; he was affiliated with the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology, Tissue Culture Association, and the National Sweet Potato Collaborators Council.

We who have worked with Bob Conover remember his good humor, his eagerness to be helpful, and the valuable suggestions that were offered whenever requested. Countless people in the tropics and subtropics of the world and in Dade County and Homestead in Florida, were rewarded by his energy and responsibility. Those who shared his family, religious, and social life were particularly enriched by his reliability and compassion.