

## THOMAS LAWRENCE MELLICHAMP, “DR. M”

October 4, 1948 – September 12, 2022

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AUDREY MELLICHAMP • Charlotte • North Carolina • USA

Our community has lost its ultimate “Plant Whisperer”, Dr. Larry Mellichamp. botanist, teacher, mentor, author, and creator (Front Cover). 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, Pennsylvania, 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, Michigan. 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 ‘Redbug’.

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).

A public memorial service was held October 30, 2022 at the UNC Charlotte Botanical Gardens.

Words spoken at the Memorial of Dr. Larry Mellichamp, October 30, 2022

PAULA GROSS • Former Assistant Director of the UNC Charlotte Botanical Gardens • Charlotte • North Carolina • USA

Nature, music, community.

Movement, change, light and color.

Wonder, memories, grief.

Reverence, transformation, and Life in all its autumnal glory.

What a gift to be present – to be together – for these moments. Thank you all for being here, for your presence, to honor the life of Larry Mellichamp and to hold his family and his community in our hearts. I especially thank Amy and the entire staff of the Botanical Gardens for the work, care, planning, and generosity that went into bringing Larry's vision of this day into being.

Most of you know me – I'm Paula Gross. I worked with Larry, here at the Botanical Gardens, for 17 years. He was a mentor, a collaborator, a catalyst for knowledge and growth, and a friend. Many of you have stood here before, in the Mellichamp native terrace – or in the greenhouse or the Glen with Larry, in person. Observing, discovering, questioning, weeding, evaluating, learning, talking, listening – definitely listening – growing.

This living, breathing land holds his legacy and his spirit. He is very much here. Will always be here. And at the same time, a garden is bigger than any one person – even someone as indomitable as Larry.

Larry was creating to his last days. When he was visioning this very day, and describing in detail to myself and others – the time of year, the paths, the words, the music – he was gifting himself and gifting us this experience. Curating and distilling in the garden, once again. He requested there be few words, wanting the experience of the garden to form meaning for each of us, as a lovingly crafted garden is wont to do.

In his physical absence, we bring our presence – alive and grateful for the beauty and wonder of this garden and for each other. Gardeners, all – in one form or another. And Larry never met a person he couldn't or wouldn't speak plants or garden to. He was both deeply focused in the details of his own world and ready to share it with you. Both impulsive and cautious. Witty, quick with an answer, but also evolving. Both down-to-earth, and somehow a touch above. The ideas never ceased and he was fortunate to have the support of his family, co-workers, and friends to do what he loved. And we were fortunate, in turn.

Larry never tired of learning, he never tired of the fascination of the natural world, never tired of words – his own – or others. Three lifetimes wouldn't have been enough to slake his thirst for these experiences. But all bodies do tire, eventually. Even if too soon by our estimation and desire.

So, with open hearts, we may grieve. With the support of all our senses and with each other, we may grieve his passing.

Larry taught, shared and inspired for lifetimes of resonance. Threads of his being are interwoven into mine – and each of yours in varying colors, textures, and weight. And WE also share threads of ourselves and our passions with others. And in this way, the fabric strengthens, and grows.

The fabric – the Web-of-Life. This was a recurring theme in many of Larry and my deeper conversations. Especially in botanical discussions, we would often end up at the web-of-life. And I feel it now. And it feels right.

In this cathedral of cellulose stained-glass. In this season of unveiling, of shedding and recycling, of letting go in a moment of beauty. . . Could there be a more glorious and graceful release?

I share my wishes offered to Larry 5 years ago . . . and to all of you now:

May your branches always reach upward,  
May your leaves be reticulate,  
May your stomata remain open,  
And may your roots always grow beyond the dripline.  
With love, honor, and gratitude for your life. Peace to you, Larry.  
Peace to us all.

CARSON TREXLER • Portland • Oregon • USA

I have learned much of Larry Mellichamp since our reunion in 2018 at Santa Rosa. He was never one to put on airs, but if he did, they were drier than the Sahara, engineered to divert attention away from whatever laudable quality of his may be at issue. Larry's internality was not easy to observe. Though he was not evasive, he was shrouded in a profound and deflective sense of professionalism that itself was curated from a very young age. He could bedazzle you with a cloud of puns, draw your attention to something else, keeping you an arm's length away from his heart. But still he was guided by his heart to care for you. He was an experimenter and cultivator of methods of education, speech, and wit. He was deft with an idea as a magician with a card; educational meme craft was his job and was his nature. One can see it in his humor. He was full of jokes, as his humor came about from understanding or tending to the attention-grabbing aspects of things. This was how he came to understand the real-time needs



Carson Trexler & Larry Mellichamp, May 2022.  
Photo by Audrey Mellichamp.

of students and the ear of his audience; how he crafted his verbal cadence; how he described a plant; how he would emphasize differently various attributes across different permutations of the same rote discourse; how his Botanical Gardens needed to grow; how a student needed to learn. Larry's keen observations were bread and butter to the work of his endless ministrations as a leader and crafter of educated people. His botanic expertise was a mere stage, a context for the brilliant machinery of a man who could have succeeded in almost any domain. He chose the herbarium and garden and the companionship of students and friends to the company of other executives, researchers, or famous names.

We were lucky to have him. I was lucky to know him. And because he needed to open up in his final, weakened years, I think he was also happy to know me.

I think he perhaps did imagine himself being remembered for all the achievements he incurred, to be recorded like some ancient stele-inscribed catalogue, to be buried somewhere for some archeologist to discover later on. We already have his CV. While prodigious, it is not especially important. Larry, a memorial stele does not make a man. The exertion and content of your character has taken you farther and to far better places than the thrust of your achievements could ever hope to have traveled. I think you knew that and wanted someone to notice, you wanted others to know that *you found out* that you were a *good person*. You were loved.

You can act good all you want for your entire life and remain unnoticed, even by your closest friends, until someone actively tries to find out what the good is that you are doing. This requires

sensitivity, it takes a silent kind of energy to listen. It is each our responsibility to look into the motives of others to understand them in a social economy. When we do this, we necessarily risk discovering things we did not want to know, but in order to understand the goodness in people we must walk with all their angels and all of their demons – all feathers flecked with grey.

It is entirely on oneself to be balanced enough to see the good in people, because, *carpe diem*, nobody else is going to tell you that it's time for you to live. So, for three years, while Larry slowly weakened from that cancer, I stayed balanced and listened and listened and listened. I listened, hours and days on end, for three years, because it was time for both of us to live.

I didn't imagine at first that behind Larry's professional façade was anything waiting to be discovered. But his eagerness to talk to me spoke volumes and betrayed his habitual professionalism. When people want to talk to you – just talk, nothing special – it means they want you to look into their heart. This is true for dates, friends, old married couples, homeless folks crying on the street, even between students and professors. He wanted to finally be seen before he passed. We got there, it breaks my heart to say it, three weeks before he died, when he said he wanted to learn more about me. I knew we had come full circle then. But circumambulating that full circle was the whole point all along, and I'm so, so happy to say that we didn't forget to dance our whole way 'round.

He wasn't simple, he was shrewd and brilliant and didn't care to prove it. He balanced fire and oil amongst friends and in academia, squeezed water from stones, augured and drew miracles out of bare land in hidden, unwanted places, and kindled the fire of the young. As he was dying, he strove to teach me the magic of botany, and now I cast those spells.

He was cantankerous, sometimes rude, abrupt, extremely obstinate, and very bossy. Stuck in his ways. Very traditionalist. He was very spiritual, perhaps not scientifically, and incredibly insightful, and only ever shared his insight with those who deserved it – not always those who could see it, or even who yet could achieve it on their own. His vision into wonderful things he would share with people who did not have the means to get there on their own. He saw majesty in his way of life, I know, and perhaps thought very highly of it. I think he did so elegantly.

He was a sweetheart, and he was loved very much. I made many oblique approaches to the doorstep of his heart and he deflected each one. Eventually I was invited in. We could see each other's designs. I couldn't see everything but I didn't need to.

He got very weak as the end came nearer. Speech got repetitive. His attitude had less brio and more brimstone. That humor though. It never left.

He said he poured everything he had into me. We both know he didn't mean his botany. He poured his soul out for things he cared about and *never asked, he never asked anyone* to notice him for it, and that's precisely why I loved him so much. It's precisely the point I want to make:

Larry Mellichamp loved what he did so much that he never asked anyone to notice. I want you all to know that he deserves all your love, because he always put his funny, happy heart first and never asked for anything in return.

### Missing Larry

TOM DIGGS • Biology • University of North Georgia • Gainesville • Georgia • USA

I had the privilege of guiding Larry around the dolomite glades of Bibb County, Alabama in 2015. I'll never forget that experience, as he took in the wonder of the rich biodiversity surrounding him. I remember him turning to the students who accompanied us and almost wistfully commenting, "I hope you realize what a special place you're looking at." It stuck with those students – they could tell what a deeply committed naturalist and scientist Larry was. We'll all miss him.



## Remembering Larry Mellichamp

PETER D'AMATO • Guerneville • California • USA

I was rather upset hearing of Larry Mellichamp's death and writing in my journal when the double 4.4 quake hit.

One thing I miss is Larry's humor. He always began his slide shows with a photo of a traffic stop sign with bullet holes in it. "This is how you know you're in the South...", he would joke.

In late summer of 1999, I gave a talk at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where the late Rob Gardner ran the botanical gardens and was of course an associate of Larry, who was from the Charlotte branch of UNC. They had installed some beautiful raised bog gardens photographed on page 50 of my book *The Savage Garden*, which Rob had sent me previous to its publication. We then left on a memorable field trip down to the Wilmington area.

Hurricane Floyd had just devastated the coast there a couple of weeks before our visit. It took half an hour to find our hotel because all the big signs on "hotel row" in Wilmington had blown over, and much was flooded. Larry and Rob showed me how the tidal surge swept in from the coast TEN miles! *Sarracenia* were in twelve inches of water; how they survived the salt was amazing, probably due to the heavy freshwater rains that followed.

They showed me several areas where flytraps were growing on the sides of highways in sand next to overflowing rivers. Tire tracks crisscrossed the plants, it was quite a sight to behold. Mosquitoes ate me alive! They showed me how red fire ants built domed nests above the normal water levels, giving flytraps a drier place to grow and eat them! Rob suffered from health problems and used braces to walk and had to avoid the more vigorous walks in the soaked areas, but Larry enthusiastically led the way.

He was a botanical genius in my opinion, not just about the carnivores, but all the fascinating plant life in the South, and how devastating habitat change was occurring as the long-leaf pine forests where CP grew in the grassy savannahs were being replaced by slash pines for lumber. It was a memorable trip with two of the experts on native CP of the Carolinas, which were unfortunately disappearing too rapidly.

Larry visited California Carnivores and gave fun slide shows and loved the field trip Damon organized to see *Darlingtonia* in the wild, during the 2018 conference in Sonoma County, and puzzled over *Utricularia* we grew in water trays at the nursery. His *Sarracenia* hybrids were and are memorable. He named a number of them after CP experts he admired, like Fred Case, and had taxonomy disagreements with Don Schnell but not hostile ones.

I loved being with Larry, his southern humor was infectious and his knowledge awe-inspiring. I'm so sorry to know he is gone.



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# CARNIVOROUS PLANT NEWSLETTER

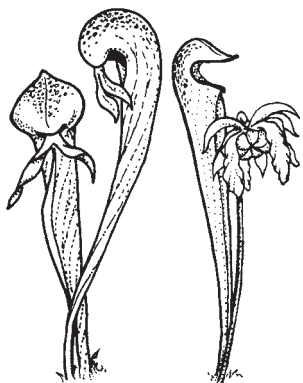
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**Front Cover:** Larry Mellichamp tending to *Sarracenia* at the McMillan Greenhouses of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Undated photo. Article on page 4.

**Back Cover:** Authors Tan Hong Liang (left) and Gideon Lim holding upper pitchers of *Nepenthes berbulu* at its type locality in Peninsular Malaysia, February 2020. Composite of photos by G. Lim and H.L. Tan. Article on page 15.

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