

Obituary Industry mourns Tony Rathjen

SA loses research legend

Key points

- Tony Rathjen dies, aged 74
- Enormous contributions to cropping in SA
- Funeral held in Adelaide on Tuesday

By **PAULA THOMPSON**

WELL-RESPECTED plant breeder and educator Tony Rathjen passed away on Wednesday last week, aged 74, leaving behind an enormous contribution to SA's agricultural community.

Dr Rathjen was responsible for the development of the durum industry in southern Australia, and was a popular lecturer at the University of Adelaide.

Many of today's leading breeders and researchers studied under him. Among them is CIMMYT Board of Trustees chairman and Mid North farmer Andrew Barr.

"Tony's contribution to the state's agricultural community was massive," he said.

"The value of his wheat varieties was huge of course, but what a lot of people in the rural communities wouldn't have seen was his contribution in terms of teaching undergraduate and post-graduate agriculture students for more than 40 years.

"His enthusiasm was incredible. Two years ago I was in Delhi, India, for a CIMMYT board meeting and I received a phone call from Tony saying he was hosting a group of undergraduate ag students and showing them around India. How many lecturers do you know that would do that?"

Dr Rathjen lectured Dr Barr when he was an undergraduate, and supervised his PhD thesis.

"Tony was such a lateral and creative thinker," Dr Barr said.

"He challenged all his ag science students to not just accept conventional thinking.

"He was one of the most significant individuals from the past two generations of agriculture in SA, and as well as that, he was just a great fella."

University of Adelaide associate professor-weed management Dr Christopher Preston said Dr Rathjen had a major impact on agriculture through his work as a wheat breeder.

"Many of the wheat varieties grown in SA over a prolonged period were bred by Tony," he said.

"His last major variety, Yitpi, is still being grown.

"Tony was a strong mentor of students and will be remembered by generations of graduates from the University of Adelaide. Many former students will remember with fondness Tony's classes and his field trips."

University of Adelaide durum breeder Dr Jason



LASTING MEMORIES: Plant breeder and educator Dr Tony Rathjen passed away last week, aged 74. He is pictured in his element, harvesting durum crops near Kapunda.

Behind the headline

IT is no wonder that the agricultural and scientific community held Tony Rathjen in high regard.

His enthusiasm for agriculture was infectious. This was best demonstrated through field trips across Australia and overseas that Tony undertook for agriculture students.

I was always sure to get a phone call from Tony when they returned – he was keen for me to have a chat with the students about their experience.

Southern Australia Durum Growers Association chairman Mark Hill said Tony had a special way of communicating with farmers.

"He was always keen to help, encourage and pass on his wealth

of scientific knowledge to help us all evaluate what we were doing and how to do it better," he said.

"He has always had great input at farmer field days, crop walks and bus tours; with the aid of a small shovel he would show those in attendance what delights – good

and bad – lurk beneath and within our soils.

"The Southern Australian Durum Association has great respect for Tony and his durum breeding skills, and right up until the past harvest he was in charge of inspecting and assessing all durum seed crops and all contracted crops to be delivered to San Remo."

– **PAULA THOMPSON**

Able said Dr Rathjen was the driving force behind the development of durum production in southern Australia.

"Tony founded the breeding program in the very late 1980s, and since the early 1990s it has involved the Southern Australia Durum Growers Association and San Remo Macaroni Pty Ltd," he said.

"While many will remember Tony principally as a bread wheat breeder, the durum varieties he recently released will be grown for many years ahead. In late 2010 he released Tjilkuri, and two more varieties in 2012 (Yawa and WID802). WID802 is a well suited variety for the lower SE and I am sure the success of this variety will continue."

Dr Rathjen grew up on a

family farm which primarily ran sheep with a cropping sideline, in the Adelaide Hills at Birdwood. He studied at Birdwood High, and went on to Adelaide High and then the University of Adelaide, studying agricultural science.

He specialised in plant breeding and genetics in his final year at the university and received the Barr Smith Travelling Scholarship to study at Cambridge University. He spent three years in England where he undertook a PhD.

Dr Rathjen returned to a breeders' job at Waite in 1965 and went on to breed more than 20 wheat varieties across his career. He was a lecturer at the university since he started as a plant breeder.

His funeral was held on Tuesday in Adelaide.

They Said It

Tony was a big believer in learning by practically doing – this was his mantra. In the short time that Tony was my mentor the one thing he instilled in me that I will always remember was the 'practicalities' of plant breeding. Of more significance is what he did for the durum industry in southern Australia. If it was not for Tony, who knows where the durum industry would be in this part of Australia.

– **Dr Jason Able, Durum Breeding Australia southern node leader**



San Remo had a very close relationship with Tony and he was instrumental in the development of new durum varieties. San Remo found Tony to be a wealth of knowledge and he helped improve the quality of the pasta trade. The kind of hand-in-hand collaboration we had was just wonderful. He was a very professional scientist and generally, a very good man.

– **Fil Ciancio, San Remo grain research coordinator**



He was one of the founding members of the Crop Science Society more than 40 years ago. It was his vision to bring together farmers, researchers and educationalists to form a society to discuss issues. He edited the Crop Science Society newsletter since its beginning and he made it a flagship publication. Hundreds of people are members of the society mainly because of the newsletters. From my perspective, his contribution to the CSS was just amazing.

– **Rob Wheeler, SARDI**



He was an excellent mentor to myself and other students studying agriculture at university. He was also just a wonderful person. The support he gave to agricultural education, both directly to teachers and through his work with the SACE board in the setting and direction of exams and assessment, was enormous. Personally, he offered wonderful support to myself



and Urrbrae with teaching crop science and agronomy.

– **Peter Smith, Urrbrae Agricultural High School assistant principal in agriculture**



Tony has been the key to the Crop Science Society newsletter for many years. He has made huge contributions to agriculture through his wheat breeding and his training and teaching.

– **Anthony Pfitzner, Crop Science Society president**

Tony was a major driving force for the Crop Science Society of South Australia, being editor of the newsletter for four decades. Tony had a knack of hassling scientists to get high-quality articles for the newsletter that made it an important resource for farmers in SA. Tony's many contributions to agriculture in SA will be greatly missed.

– **Dr Christopher Preston, University of Adelaide associate professor-weed management**



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