

County's greenest thumb retires

Monmouth chief agricultural agent served farmers, residents for 34 years



Rich Obal stands at the gate to the Children's Garden behind the Monmouth County Agriculture Building in Freehold Township. Obals is retiring from his job as a Monmouth County agricultural agent. / THOMAS P. COSTELLO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Outside Rich Obal's office last week sat a favorite tree of his, a full moon maple.

"The tree's going to have to go to a different location," said Obal, noting the variety of Japanese maple, its root system balled in burlap, would be moved to a better-drained area across the driveway at the Monmouth County Agricultural Building in Freehold Township.

Moving the tree was an easy call for Obal. After all, he grew up in a family nursery business and, for 34 years, has been a county agricultural agent.

"I was fortunate when I started this job I had practice in the field," Obal said.

On Wednesday a day short of his 64th birthday, Obal will spend his last day on the job before retirement — the full moon maple, in fact, a gift from the county Master Gardeners through a donation from Millstone Township nurseryman Richard Karkalits.

"I've had the greatest job in the world," Obal said. "It's been a wonderful ride. I'm going to miss it. It's always going to be with me."

Obal joined the Rutgers University Cooperative Extension office in the county in 1977 as a junior agent. Then, potatoes were a viable crop and cows were still being milked commercially, before the area became more noted for horse farms

and nursery stock. Obal has visited farms, taught classes — his job gives him the title of associate professor at Rutgers — and diagnosed problems from home gardeners.

“I would say he is the model agricultural agent,” said Gary DeFelice, president of the county Board of Agriculture.

“His agricultural knowledge was broad,” said DeFelice, who farms in Middletown. “For a guy that had that kind of knowledge, he was a very modest person.

“He helped anybody that came to him,” DeFelice said. “That’s what I admired about him. He was truly a people person.”

“He’s got such an engaging persona,” said Lillian G. Burry, a member of the Monmouth County Board of Freeholders and board liaison to the extension. “He exudes enthusiasm. Rich, the person, will be terribly missed.”

With Don Mohr’s retirement 18 years ago, Obal became the senior agent and head of the county office, not only overseeing the agriculture end, but also the consumer and 4-H Club section.

Bill Sciarappa, the other agricultural agent in the Monmouth County office, will be lone agent, along with being the department head.

“Monmouth County was lucky to have two agents,” DeFelice said. “The norm in the state is one. We knew Bill was going to be taking over the reins, but we really didn’t expect to get another agent in, given the (economic) times.”

The Monmouth County agents also work beyond the county’s boundaries.

“I’ve had a very good run at this job,” said Obal, whose wife, Tish, died two years ago. “It’s been a very satisfying position. It’s time to go to new ventures and passions — travel, hiking, cycling, developing new skills and continuing to learn.”

At his Howell home, Obal maintains a 700-square-foot vegetable and flower garden.

“I grow dahlias as a specialty,” Obal said. “Whether I remain in my home or a new one, I will always have a need for a piece of land.”

“I’m going to stay involved in the (agriculture) field, most evidently in the teaching aspects,” said Obal, who has no children. “Teaching has always been my passion. That always gives me the opportunity to learn.”

“He’s a wonderful teacher,” said Diane C. Larson, the extension’s horticulturist for the last 13 years. “You could read books and look at pictures of plant problems and insects and diseases, but, until you see it for yourself and have it taught to you and explained to you and identified, you’re not really going to learn it. I was lucky he was always there and explained everything. That’s how I learned so much.”

“I think everything was an adventure with him,” Burry said.

On one of his last working days, Obal stared into a microscope, viewing a shabby twig of a blue spruce, assisting two Master Gardeners to diagnose a canker problem for a county resident.

“It’s hard retiring,” Obal said.

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