

# John Carlton Cain

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If there ever was a true “rags to riches” story in the world of academe, John Carlton Cain was a prime example.

Born in Blakely, Georgia on October 14, 1911, John Cain was the son of poor, struggling sharecropper parents. Over the years, and because of the background and teachings of his mother and father, he gained respect and almost a love relationship with things growing in the soil. He also found out that having an education would allow him to become a better person and serve his fellow man in ways that he could only dream about as a child.

Eventually, he entered the University of Florida and was awarded a Bachelor of Science degree in Agriculture from that institution in 1935. Even before entering college, he had associated himself with the agricultural experiment station system of the United States, having worked as a Field Assistant at the Florida Sub-tropical Experiment Station from 1930-31 and then from 1931-35 at the Florida Agricultural Experiment Station as a Laboratory Technician.

After graduating from the University of Florida, he continued his stay at the Florida Experiment Station until 1940, first as a Research Assistant, then as an Assistant Horticulturist his last three years. His primary work was with citrus crops.

In 1940, he felt it important that he advance his educational standing and entered Cornell University to study in the field of Pomology. He also worked as an Instructor in Research in the Department of Pomology while obtaining his degree.

World War II interrupted his education temporarily. He entered the United States Army in 1942 and served as a commanding officer until his discharge in 1945. He had an outstanding military career and was awarded the Bronze Star for his achievements.

After the war, John Cain returned to Cornell University where he was awarded a Ph.D. degree in 1946. That same year, he was appointed an Associate Professor of Pomology at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station in Geneva. In 1951, he was appointed to the position of Professor of Pomology.

This outstanding scientist came to the Geneva Experiment Station with a superb background. He had advanced training in the fields of pomology, plant physiology, plant biochemistry, and soils chemistry. While in Florida, he

gained considerable experience and knowledge of cold storage problems of citrus and other sub-tropical fruits. He also had conducted, before coming to Geneva, six years of research on the nutrition of deciduous fruits.

From the time he came to Geneva until his retirement in 1973, he expanded the horizons of his fellow colleagues and the fruit industry, not only in New York but also in other parts of the world, with his outstanding contributions in the field of plant nutrition. Other scientists universally recognized his studies demonstrating nutrient uptake and interactions in fruit plants. Later in his career, and working with agricultural engineers from the Ithaca campus of Cornell University, he turned his attention to the mechanical pruning and harvesting of trees and the design of orchards and trees. Many of the things that John Cain recommended during his career concerning nutrition, spacing, and planting of tree-fruit orchards have stood the test of time and are still being used today by leading fruit growers.

John Cain was always looking for something new to do, or some different tack to take with a particular project. In his private life, he developed a great affinity as an amateur astronomer. This interest in astronomy perhaps led him to one of his most fascinating cooperative projects with the astronauts in the Apollo Space Program. With the cooperation of some friends close to the astronauts involved in the program at the time, John got the astronauts on both Apollo Flights 10 and 13 to smuggle apple seeds in a fountain pen aboard those spacecrafts. The seeds were from the variety, Flower of Kent, grown at the Geneva Station. This variety was particularly suitable for a “zero-gravity” flight because this apple was the same variety that reputedly hit Newton on the head when he discovered the laws of gravity. Following the flights, John Cain and his colleagues at the Station grew seedlings from these seeds. For a number of years, there were three trees growing on the campus of the Station that represented these two flights. One of the astronauts involved in the project, James Lovell, sent Dr. Cain a letter of thanks for helping with this project.

Dr. Cain’s work was not confined to New York State. In 1954-55, he served as a horticultural advisor to the Catholic University in Santiago, Chile. Then, in 1964, he acted as a consultant at the Inter-American Institute for Agricultural Science in Turrialba, Costa Rica. In 1972, he was elected a Fellow of the American Society for Horticultural Science, the most prestigious award of that outstanding organization of scientists. Only a handful of individuals out of a membership that exceeds 3,500 are elected each year as Fellows. From 1972-73, he served as President of the Northeast Section of the American Society for Horticultural Science. He also was an Associate Editor for the Society for five years.

During his career at Geneva, he authored 73 scientific papers in the fields of fruit nutrition, mechanical harvesting and pruning, and orchard design. He was awarded the title of Emeritus Professor upon his retirement in 1973.

He and his wife, Marie, were married for 63 years, and the couple had two sons, James McRae and John Jr. Dr. Cain was 86 years of age when he died.

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