LeRoy August Ellerbrock, 72, Associate Professor at Cornell’s Department of Horticulture for many years, passed away unexpectedly at his home on December 12, 2014 after a brief illness. Roy grew up on his parents’ family farm in New Cleveland, OH. There he did the usual chores, helped to tend his father’s large truck garden, and organized baseball games with neighbor boys in nearby fields. Roy went on to graduate from Miller City High School where he was captain of the basketball team and president of the Class of 1960. Roy studied Russian at the University of Cincinnati, but his studies were interrupted by service in the U.S. Air Force, in the Air Weather Service at Fliegerhorst Army Air field near Hanau, Germany. He returned to the U.S. to study botany at The Ohio State University, graduating Phi Beta Kappa in 1969.

Roy received his Ph.D. in Plant Pathology in 1976 from Cornell University, working under the guidance of Professor James Lorbeer. His study of a disease of onions, carried out on growers’ fields in several areas of New York, together with his experience of working on a farm while young, launched a lifelong career of research and interaction with the onion industry. His first job after the Ph.D. was employment as a plant pathologist for the USDA in Chicago, followed by engagement by the Santa Fe Railroad as a produce inspector. But Cornell pulled him back, and he joined the Department of Vegetable Crops faculty in 1978 with responsibility for research and extension work on the high organic matter soils of New York (so-called muck soils), and teaching.

Roy became a familiar figure in onion fields, working closely with Cooperative Extension specialists and growers. He focused on topics that represented the major production constraints to the industry, primarily the control of weeds, selection of higher-yielding varieties, and optimum levels of fertilizer. His operational style was unique, and was vividly remembered by a vegetable specialist that worked with him:

"Roy deployed his field trials throughout the onion growing areas of the state, and when it was time to hit my territory, he’d call me the night before and arrange to meet me at the field first thing the next morning. I would show up at 8 a.m., to find that Roy had already been there for at
least an hour, had laid out the trial, staked the plots, and was already strapping on his CO2 sprayer to apply treatments. He was the picture of efficiency, striding plot to plot, explaining each treatment, commenting on weed populations, and shedding empty herbicide bottles as he went….We might put out several trials in one morning, then he’d pack up his truck and speed off to the next pocket of muck scheduled on his rounds. Later in the season he would pop in and out, ghostlike, to rate his trials….Roy never ate a meal, and barely drank water when he was out doing field trials, but he graciously let his “collaborator” wolf down a sandwich and some iced tea when I was ready for a break. Those were great days, in the field with Roy Ellerbrook.”

Another specialist stated Roy was “highly respected by growers, was very approachable and a personally engaging person. He was warmly welcomed at any farm and many a producer dinner meeting. In 2004, he was awarded, by the Orange County Vegetable Growers Improvement Cooperative Association, the Lifetime Achievement Award for all of his hard work toward improving producer profitability.”

These sentiments were also shared by other extension colleagues: “Roy traveled the State relentlessly to serve his growers, without expectation of reward or credit. Roy was a modest man who did not seek the limelight, but earned a deep respect and immense gratitude from all New York onion growers nonetheless."

Roy felt that growing up on a farm was instrumental in his ability to build relationships with growers. He was the Cornell liaison to the NYS Vegetable Growers for many years and was a key part of the establishment and growth of the statewide Vegetable Growers Meeting, starting in the 1980’s. Roy had a passion for teaching and remembered not only students’ names years later, but could describe their personalities and interests. He shared his love of the vegetable growing industry with his students and conducted field trips to visit growers in several parts of the state as part of his courses, so that they could see and experience what they studied. He thus fostered a love of gardening and vegetable production in an entire generation of students.

The close collaboration of Cornell faculty and major agricultural industries in New York State was a common feature during the establishment and growth of such enterprises in the 19th and 20th century, but has become increasingly rare in recent years. In his quiet but effective manner, Roy Ellerbrock epitomized the best of what might seem to be a vanishing breed.

*Chris Wien, chair; Elmer Ellis Ewing, Maire R. Ullrich*