



Science
Societies

In memoriam: Stephen Carl Mason

July 28, 2026

In Memoriam

Stephen Carl Mason
1949–2026



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Dr. Stephen Carl Mason, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Agronomy and Horticulture at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL), passed away on June 15, 2026, at age 76, following more than three decades at UNL. Admired by his students and respected by colleagues in our department and across our profession in the U.S. and abroad, Steve was a dedicated teacher, adviser, mentor, and colleague who was available to students and always concerned about offering his expertise to help them pursue a practical education in agronomy.

Steve was born in Missouri in 1949 and spent early years on the family farm. He received a B.S. in 1971 from the University of Missouri in Agricultural Education. He then served as an agricultural adviser in Haiti with the Mennonite Central Committee, helping farmers adopt more sustainable, resource-efficient production practices. He received his M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in 1976 and 1983, respectively, both from Purdue University. The research for his doctoral dissertation was conducted in part in the International Center for Tropical Agriculture in Palmira, Colombia. While at Purdue he met his wife-to-be, Nora D'Croz who completed a Ph.D. degree in maize breeding. They have two children, Daniel and Michael, both graduates of the University of Nebraska who have gone on to careers in the sciences and education, respectively.

Steve was hired at UNL in 1984 and promoted to full professor in 1994. He was an innovative teacher, known for bringing a hands-on approach to the classroom. He taught across a broad range of agronomy courses. Throughout his career, he also developed, updated, and published practical teaching guides, study guides, and course references. Alongside his wife, he led the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources Education Study Tours to Argentina, immersing UNL undergrads' in Southern Hemisphere agriculture.

Of all the challenging courses he taught, Steve considered Crop Management Strategies, an experiential capstone course, his favorite. This case-study-based course synthesized past coursework into comprehensive economic and environmental farm improvement plans that were developed through direct interaction with farmers and stakeholders. "I loved this class more than any other," he said. "I enjoyed learning right along with the students. It pulled us out of the classroom and into the real world. It has been my reality check, discovering new trends, practices and herbicides.

"The class was important because it's not just about a field or a plant; you're working with the whole system on a farm and how it relates to the well-being of people and the ecological concerns of the community," he said. "We get to see the big picture and that's fascinating."

As principal investigator for the INTSORMIL Collaborative Research Support Program (1986–2007), Steve dedicated decades to working with regional researchers and smallholder farmers to improve conservation agriculture practices and food security in sub-Saharan West Africa. His research centered on optimizing sorghum, pearl millet, and cowpea cropping systems to boost yield stability and nutrient resilience for local farmers. Steve supervised more than 20 graduate students, many from developing countries, and especially enjoyed mentoring them throughout their careers as many now occupy important research and teaching positions in their home countries. Steve was also regional coordinator for the INTSORMIL Central America Program for seven years (2000–2007). He later led a McKnight Foundation-funded soil and water management research project in Burkina Faso from 2010 to 2015 and served as the University of Nebraska Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources point person for collaboration with the University of Zagreb in Croatia from 2012 to 2017. In support of this partnership, he completed a Fulbright Specialist appointment in Croatia in 2014.

Steve's research contributed significantly to UNL's dryland agriculture program, establishing vital baselines for Great Plains dryland agriculture by defining optimal planting windows, plant populations, and water-use efficiency for maize, grain sorghum, and drought-resilient pearl millet. His multi-decade field trials proved that diversified crop rotations drastically improved soil nutrient retention, while demonstrating that local environmental factors ultimately dictate final food-grade grain quality and milling integrity.

Steve's contributions at UNL and abroad were recognized with numerous honors and awards. He was named a Fellow of the National Association of Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA), ASA, and CSSA in 1990, 1998, and 2006, respectively. He co-authored more than 100 publications, often with graduate students and colleagues.

Through this outstanding career, Steve made lasting contributions in teaching, research, and administration that will continue to shape future programs as well as the ones he served. He will be missed immensely by colleagues in the department and across UNL and internationally, and we are proud to have worked with him as a colleague and friend during his time in Nebraska.

Hosted by Dr. Martha Mamo, Department Head, and Dr. Charles Francis, Professor Emeritus, UNL Agronomy and

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