

Bob Skirvin Academic Obituary
To be shared with ASHS as a tribute
October 1, 2025



Figure 1. Dr. Robert Skirvin, photo by David Riecks, 2015.

It is with heavy hearts that we announce the passing of Dr. Robert M. Skirvin on August 24, 2025 at the ClarkLindsey MeadowLark Assisted Living Facility in Urbana, IL, surrounded by his loving family. Bob is survived by his beloved wife, Margie; his sons Timothy and daughter-in-law Rebecca; his son Danny and daughter-in-law Celeste; and his three grandchildren Gabrielle, Robert (named for him), and Juliette. Dr. Skirvin was an Emeritus Professor of Horticulture at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), formally retired in May 2010. He is recognized for his research and patents on

small fruits and viticulture, including the 'Improved Chancellor' grape, 'Illini Hardy' blackberry, 'Everthornless' blackberry, 'Chester Thornless' blackberry, 'Dwarf Thornless' blackberry, and 'Hull Thornless' blackberry. In 2000, he received the College of ACES Paul A. Funk Award and was named a Fellow of the American Society for Horticultural Science (ASHS) in 2005. Professor Skirvin was also a distinguished pedagogue and mentor, including in the UIUC Campus Honors program, and received numerous campus and external teaching awards, including the ASHS Undergraduate Educator Award in 1998.

Robert M. Skirvin was born on October 27, 1947 in Burlington, Washington. In 1965, he began his undergraduate education at Oral Roberts University and transferred to Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, where he received his B.S. (1969) and M.S. (1971). Professor Skirvin completed his Ph.D. (1975) at Purdue University in West Lafayette under the direction of Dr. Jules Janick. Professor Skirvin taught at Purdue University as an Assistant Professor of Horticulture from 1975-76. In 1976, he came as Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where he was promoted to Associate Professor in 1981 and full Professor in 1988. He was a visiting Professor at research institutes in New Zealand (1985-86) and Australia (1990-91) conducting research on blackberries and apples. Professor Skirvin developed innovative courses at the University of Illinois such as Small Fruits and Viticulture. His wildly popular Introduction to Horticulture course made him beloved by thousands of students over the years, sending many students on career trajectories in horticulture. His legendary apple tasting lab drew crowds from all over the community every fall.

Professor Skirvin's early research was in the then-new area of plant tissue culture. Plant chimeras fascinated him, and he developed methods for breaking the chimeras into their component genotypes, first using rapid micropropagation, and later using regeneration by organogenesis and somatic embryogenesis. Later, he would employ these methods to improve *Rubus*, developing thornless clones of 'Logan', 'Thornless Evergreen', and 'Whitford' blackberries, variants of the tree fruits *Malus*, and *Pyrus*, as well as various other food crops. He utilized both organogenesis and somatic embryogenesis to mine plant cell cultures for somaclonal variation. His paper, "Natural and induced variation in tissue culture" (*Euphytica* 27:241-266, 1978) was the first in-depth review of somaclonal variation in the horticultural literature.

His later research still focused on the use of in vitro culture to improve food crops, but in more varied ways. For example, when horseradish growers in the East St. Louis area approached him for help with a devastating internal microorganism infection that rendered the horseradish roots unsaleable, he initiated studies on removal of these microorganisms through heat treatment and subsequent meristem culture of in vitro plants, followed by genetic testing to determine the infection status of the regenerated plants. Microorganism-negative plants derived from this process, when planted in the

field, were restored to vigor and saleability. Dr. Skirvin also authored numerous extension publications and book chapters on a wide variety of food crops, focusing primarily on genetics and breeding.

In the late 1990s and early turn of the century, Dr. Skirvin's lab turned its focus to wine grapes that were suitable for the Illinois climate: No small task. The selected cultivars were North American species that were hybridized with European grapes to convey cold tolerance for Midwestern winters. The resulting scion was grafted onto North American rootstocks for phylloxera resistance. In addition, the grapes needed to be of sufficient quality to be able to be fermented into fine quality wine and, ideally, resistant to the herbicide 2, 4-D. Herbicide drift damage from nearby corn fields was a concern at the time. One of Dr. Skirvin's students successfully transformed some elite lines in plant tissue culture to carry a gene for 2,4-D resistance, and was the first of its kind. Bob was an exceptional educator, combining theory with learning grape industry practices to benefit the horticultural food crops industry of Illinois. He loved international travel and took advantage of the opportunity to sample wines from around the world in his travels.

Anyone who knew Professor Skirvin understood his love for research and teaching, but it was clear his primary passion was investing in people. Professor Skirvin was an endlessly humble, accepting, and compassionate human being. He was perpetually jolly and always rolled up his sleeves to get deep into whatever project presented itself right alongside his students. His fun-loving personality could coax enthusiasm from even the most recalcitrant group of students; how can you say "no" and stand back when a full Professor removes his shoes and socks, rolls up his pant legs, and gets stained to the knees while stomping grapes to demonstrate the traditional form of winemaking? His enthusiasm was contagious because he was often laughing and rarely serious. There was so much wit and humor to be deciphered in his sometimes-rapid mumbled speech, and at meetings and gatherings he would always confidently shove his hand out and say "Hi, I'm Bob Skirvin, who are you?", even when he knew the person, which came in handy when those around him couldn't remember somebody's name in a social setting. At social events he would often make an appearance, but then "Houdini it" when it was time to leave, to the bewilderment of even his most dedicated lab associates who never actually caught him exiting; they'd just suddenly realize he was no longer there.

There was never a stranger in Professor Skirvin's lab or family home. He was a mentor to both capable and struggling students alike, a non-judgmental adopter of the occasional misfit, and he made everyone in his lab feel like close family regardless of their country of origin, orientation, or education level. Professor Skirvin had a knack for seeing greatness in students before they recognized those abilities themselves, giving them a job to do in the lab so that they could find their place. He and his family offered

his students and their own families a home away from home while attending university. When students struggled, he'd always remind them "it's good to suffer;" and working hard meant reaping the benefits, even if they weren't immediately obvious. Even once his students had moved away for their many and varied career paths, he never forgot a name, spouse's name, nor their children's names and would periodically surprise them with what became lovingly referred to as the "Dr. Bob Box of Blob" care package; boxes full of random items that looked like somebody dumped the contents of their junk drawer (plus at least one book) into a box labeled "media mail" covered with seemingly a bare minimum of 500 stamps he'd sorted individually by hand from bags of small-value stamps he'd bought in bulk. Every single student that went through Professor Skirvin's lab likely still has beloved items and news clippings from those boxes that they and their families have to this day because they always contained touching, personal gifts for the recipient that he'd found at garage sales all around Urbana-Champaign. He was equally as giving of his curated collections of decades'-worth of slides and teaching materials, allowing his graduate students to pull from those materials and use them as they became Professors themselves and developed their own courses at universities around the globe.

Bob formed close relationships with many of his Masters, Ph.D., non-thesis graduate students, and visiting scientists. He mentored and graduated no fewer than 13 Ph.D. and 17 M.S. students in total. He and his students were highly productive publishing at least 113 refereed journal articles, 21 book chapters, and 221 extension publications. To fuel this productivity Bob loved afternoon coffee, hot sauce, garage sales, campus surplus, good wine, good people, a good laugh, and a good hug. Professor Skirvin's hugs were as intense as any father's, squeezing the lucky recipient so tightly that their jaws ached. Everyone around him knew that he cared deeply for them, and that very love and acceptance changed lives and, in some cases, saved them. As Margaret Norton, Skirvin lab manager and teaching associate put it, "With Bob, academics and research were important, but people were importanter."



Figure 2. The Skirvin Lab in his home in Champaign, IL USA circa 2004.



Figure 3. Bob enjoying good friends and good wine near Toronto, Canada circa 2002.