Dr. William Ackerman:  
A Man with a Vision  
Gene Phillips

There are a multitude of accolades that could be attributed to Dr. William Ackerman, but I would like to describe him as a visionary. I knew Bill from long distance, and communicated with him often for many years. We mostly corresponded by e-mail, and during these frequent e-chats, we got to know each other quite well. Bill was a very generous man, and he eagerly shared plant material from his hybrid camellias with many growers across America and the world. He was never concerned about proprietary rights for camellias that he developed over the years. Instead, his greatest desire was to share these plants with nurseries, so they could spread them around the camellia world. Very few camellia growers that I have known have had such a far-reaching vision as Bill Ackerman. He saw an opportunity to change the world by developing camellias that would tolerate colder temperatures and thus expanding their magic to millions of gardeners.

Bill Ackerman was first and foremost a plant scientist. His career with the United States Department of Agriculture took him around the country studying and working with many plants before he found his ultimate calling. Bill did not see camellias as just pretty flowers. His vision was much greater, as he saw them as landscape plants with unlimited potential as part of the garden. He did not see the one flower, but rather he saw the many flowers and the plant all working as one in unison to make a statement in the landscape. Bill envisioned developing many different shaped plants with a multitude of colors and forms that made statements in the garden. He always saw the beauty of the individual flowers, but Bill realized that the greatest potential in interesting gardeners in camellias was found in their landscape usage.

Early in his breeding career working with camellias, Bill sought to add a very much desired piece to the camellia puzzle. Many gardeners have always wished that camellias were fragrant, and Bill Ackerman envisioned that possibility as well. He wanted to develop hybrids that were not only beautiful but also very fragrant. In 1968, Bill introduced his hybrid called ‘Fragrant Pink’. This camellia has become one of the most popular fragrant camellias ever introduced. He continued to amaze us with his introduction of ‘Cinnamon Cindy’ in 1973. His ‘Fragrant Joy’ and ‘Cinnamon Scentsation’ are two more hybrid camellias that Bill developed with outstanding fragrance.

What a wonderfully fragrant world of camellias we would enjoy today, if it were not for Bill developing a new vision of a higher calling. The extreme cold weather in the 1970’s and 1980’s destroyed many of the camellias in the Washington and Maryland areas of America. Bill once told me that after he saw so many camellias being completely killed during the extremely cold winters, he realized that he no longer had the luxury of being able to breed for fragrance. His new vision was to breed for survival and performance of camellias in cold climates.
This vision of breeding camellias to develop great varieties for northern climates would consume him for the remainder of his life. His goals were to develop hybrids that could be enjoyed and appreciated by a group of gardeners that were unable to grow camellias because of their extremely cold environment. Bill realized that his task involved two aspects. The first was to breed and test the cold hardy hybrids. The second, which was equally as important, was to educate the northern gardener about growing camellias. Most of the information previously published came from a perspective of gardeners growing camellias in milder climates. Bill’s two outstanding books entitled *Beyond the Camellia Belt* and *Growing Camellias in Cold Climates* provided the road maps for a new generation of camellia gardeners to appreciate camellias. What an incredible vision!

In July of 2013, the camellia world lost one of its greatest visionaries. Bill’s health had been declining for several years, but that never stopped him from pushing ahead with new ideas and dreams of even more interesting camellias. Over his career, he developed many camellias that will continue to serve as an incredible legacy. ‘Jerry Hill’ and ‘Ashton’s Ballet’ were two of the ones that Bill liked the most. Those of us that knew Bill Ackerman were truly blessed to know a man with an incredible vision of camellias. Let us continue to make the world a better place with camellias as he did throughout his well-lived life.