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University of California – Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources

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Subject: Fresno Advisor Retires After 37 Years of Pulling Weeds

Even after 37 years of weeding, Fresno County's University of California Cooperative Extension weed advisor Bill Fischer sees beauty in what he terms "vegetation management."

That's clear when he quotes from Shakespeare's Richard III: ". . . go root away the noisome weed which without profits suck the soil's fertility from wholesome flowers." And it's clear when he discusses his work.

Though Fischer will retire Oct. 1, he won't be hanging up his hoe. He has applied for emeritus status and plans to continue pursuing ways to help farmers to combat weeds.

Weeds have taken Fischer to all continents of the world, except Antarctica. But he says he considers himself lucky to have been based the last 34 years in Fresno.

"I couldn't have been in a better area," Fischer said. "The crops grown in Fresno County are so diversified. Every crop has its own weed problem and every weed problem its own solution."

Though Extension is generally known for its work in education, during his entire career, Fischer has emphasized applied research.

"I feel that well done applied research is an excellent teaching tool and an excellent learning tool," Fischer said.

A sign posted beneath the carefully organized rack of brochures Fischer has written reads: "My information is no information until you are informed by my information."

The materials are mostly copies of his research progress reports, a series titled "Rucina" after the Augustinian period goddess of weeding.

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Fischer wrote the first Rucina in 1975 after picking up the title from his readings while on sabbatical leave in England. Since then, he has completed 47 volumes focusing on a wide variety of commodities, specific weeds and groups of related chemicals.

Fisher was also the author of the Growers Weed Identification Handbook, a comprehensive, well-illustrated guide to weeds in agriculture. The book is widely used throughout the United States and is one of the most popular publications distributed by the University's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

During his career, Fischer published more than 500 papers based on his applied research.

The recent emphasis in all aspects of pest management has been reducing the use of synthetic chemicals, however, Fischer said he has been advocating integrated vegetation management for years.

"I've advocated such methods as keeping careful records of weeds in the fields," Fischer said.

He has recommended crop rotation to control weeds, careful farm sanitation -- such as weeding areas surrounding fields and not allowing weeds to go to seed -- and the timely use of hoes and mechanical cultivation.

Nevertheless, Fischer said herbicides have an indispensable role in agriculture. "Herbicides take the drudgery out of farming," he said. "In undeveloped areas of the world, since time immemorial, farmers spend the day, sun up to sun down, hoeing weeds. Here, we can't do that."

Fischer earned a bachelor's degree in agronomy and dairy from Ohio State University in 1953, and a master's degree in education from UC Davis in 1954.

In 1954, he joined the University of California staff in Stockton; in 1957, he took his position in Fresno County.

Fischer took advantage of the voluntary early retirement incentive program adopted last year by the Regents of the University of California. The program's aim is to cut the University's budget without resorting to layoffs.