

Merit Awards Committee Report

6/19/07

Richard Olmstead, Chair (Dennis Stevenson, Dan Crawford, members)

Five nominations were received for the BSA Merit Award this year. Three nominations were accompanied by letters of support advocating for the nominee, whereas the other two were received in the form of a letter of nomination, accompanied by a CV for the nominee and names of individuals to contact for letters of evaluation (as per the call for nominations).

The Committee met electronically several times during May to discuss the nominations and issues pertaining to the Merit Award and its role in BSA. While accepting that committees in other years may have held different interpretations, this committee agreed that “outstanding contributions to botanical science” should be interpreted to mean scientific contributions. Hence, award decisions were made on the basis of the impact of the research contributions made by nominees. We recognize that BSA members make many contributions that enhance the field of Botany through teaching, service to the scientific community, and to the Society and that such contributions all are worthy of recognition by the Society and should, perhaps, be identified with specific awards (e.g., the Bessey Award for excellence in teaching).

As a small committee, we agreed that we would resolve any conflict over approval of award nominations by consensus. Thus, only nominees about whom we all agreed were meritorious were approved. After reading the files and sharing our views on the nominees, three were approved for Merit Awards. While recognizing that each of the other two nominees had made valuable contributions to botanical science and to the field of botany in many ways, we decided that their contributions did not merit the highest award that the Society bestows at this time. The BSA President, Executive Director, and all nominators were notified of decisions on June 1.

Comments and recommendations. There are a few concerns that arose in discussions this year and which have been raised in recent past years.

Award Criteria. The simple statement of the criteria for the award is appealing for its simplicity, but leaves open to interpretation what is meant by “outstanding contributions to botanical science” and “truly exceptional scientists in plant biology.” Perhaps giving the Awards Committee leeway to interpret the criteria as they see fit is desirable, but committees in the past few years have grappled with issues pertaining to criteria, concluding that research should be emphasized, despite the fact that different criteria have, apparently, been applied in the past. A more explicit statement of criteria would be valuable.

Establishment of a BSA Service Award. Many societies have awards for service to the Society, either as regular awards or as special awards. Given that the BSA has a teaching

award, establishment of a service award may be one means of clarifying the criteria for the Merit Award as an award based on scientific research contributions.

Form of the nomination. Letters of support accompanying nominations tend to be strictly advocational, whereas letters requested for evaluation purposes have a very different purpose. The latter conforms to the strict interpretation of the call for nominations. However, the former tends to be the way most nominations are received in the past few years. “Complete package” nominations, including letters, are far easier administratively, but do not necessarily provide a critical evaluation of the nominations. The present system does not assure that the most meritorious members are being recognized each year. Whereas it will be easier to continue receiving nominations in the fashion we have in the past, perhaps the Society should consider generating the nominations and soliciting evaluations. This certainly would require more work and a larger committee and may not be feasible. A middle ground may be to have Society members generate the nominations and submit a letter and CV, while leaving it up to the committee to solicit the letters of evaluation. This would be more work for the committee, but would lead to a more objective evaluation process.

Submitted by,
Richard Olmstead