

# Some of Iowa's best exports are ideas for improving agriculture

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(Photo: The Register)

The Iowa mementoes on the shelves of my office in Florida are, of course, agriculture-themed tchotchkes — three carved wooden hogs and two John Deere model tractors.

It's from a distance, four years after I left Iowa State University, that I can more fully appreciate how Iowa's contributions to agriculture are measured in more than bacon and bushels.

Iowa holds a special place in the global movement to combat hunger as one of its important intellectual hubs. We need places to grow ideas as much as we need fields to grow corn.

The 1,200 people who converge on Des Moines this week — presidents, agriculture secretaries, CEOs, chefs, non-profit leaders, academics and activists — recognize Iowa as a place to feed their minds. It's a mecca for thought leadership for anti-hunger crusaders. We're working as hard as we can to feed the world, and we come to Iowa seeking a morsel or two that will help us work smarter.

Five years after the passing of Iowa-born Norman Borlaug, the annual conference that bears his name that starts in Des Moines Wednesday is the best way I can think of to get close to his thinking.

Indeed, the first time I met Borlaug was at the conference. He insisted that it was his honor to meet me. The honor, of course, was mine, but what I believe Borlaug really was kind enough to be saying was that it meant something to him to meet the director of the Iowa Cooperative Extension Service, among my duties as Iowa State's vice president for extension and outreach at the time.

This year, Borlaug's protégé Sanjaya Rajaram will receive the World Food Prize, the equivalent of a Nobel Prize among those who work on global food security. He's perhaps Borlaug's leading apostle, and his research is credited with increasing world wheat production by 200 million tons.

He's coming to Iowa to receive it because Iowans have long recognized the important role their state has played in feeding the planet. The World Food Prize headquarters was originally on the east coast, but when it lost funding, the Des Moines Register championed its rescue. Iowa businessman and philanthropist John Ruan Sr. stepped forward to endow the prize, so the World Food Prize headquarters now sits in Des Moines and hosts the events that honor great achievements annually.

Although there will be too many attendees to hold the symposium in the World Food Prize's Hall of Laureates, converted from the old Des Moines Public Library, they'll visit it to reacquaint themselves with the stories of how Iowa-born President Herbert Hoover cast politics aside to feed the children of the Soviet Union following World War I; how George Washington Carver developed the expertise at Iowa State that made him an agricultural innovator and an adviser to Gandhi; and how the 1960 Iowa hog lift helped Japan recover from two typhoons.

The Hall of Laureates will also be the perfect place for informal "What-Would-Norman-Do?" conversations about our own work.

Iowa is building on its legacy with innovation. Its "Cultivation Corridor" from Des Moines to Ames brings together agriculture, bioscience and business as food's version of Silicon Valley.

Iowa Lt. Gov. Kim Reynolds leads the STEM Food and Agricultural Council, a global brain trust focused on advancing science, technology, engineering and math education to meet growing demand for food, feed, and renewable fuels. Iowa hosted its inaugural meeting last year, and the council will reconvene this week in Des Moines.

Another Iowa idea that Florida would do well to emulate is the Global Youth Institute. It gives high schoolers a chance to meet global agricultural leaders, tour research facilities, do hands-on projects to fight hunger and qualify for internships abroad.

Even the photo I have of my RAGBRAI team in my current office reminds me of Iowa's leadership in food science. The photo's backdrop is Morrill Hall at Iowa State. The building is named for the senator credited with creating the land-grant university system to teach agriculture and mechanics to the masses, a system Iowa was the first state in the nation to embrace.

Iowa continues to set the agenda with the theme of this week's conference: "The Greatest Challenge in Human History: Can We Sustainably Feed the 9 Billion People on Our Planet by the Year 2050?"

It's the very question around which we're building our undergraduate education at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences to train and inspire a new generation of Borlaugs and Rajarams.

And it's the question that inspires our Food Systems Hub research initiative to assemble a multidisciplinary team to discover how to overcome environmental degradation, shrinking agricultural acreage, water shortages, market volatility and climate change to meet what the conference calls "The Greatest Challenge."

Your most lucrative exports in terms of dollars you can see today may be tractors and swine meat.

Your exports of ideas and inspiration are what will keep your state vital to the success of global agriculture. There's a fresh shipment going out this week, carried to more than 60 nations to which the Borlaug symposium attendees will return. It's what drew me to Iowa in the first place, and it's why Iowa continues to hold my interest from 1,200 miles away.

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