

TEACHER OF THE YEAR: GERT PEEK

'I want to enthuse them in any way I can'

'He can even make a handful of soil interesting.' This is how his students talk about him, so it came as no surprise to them when he was announced teacher of the year 2011. 'He is so enthusiastic that he makes boring subjects nice and you start trying harder.'

TEXT YVONNE DE HILSTER PHOTOGRAPHY GUY ACKERMANS

What do we find in the soil here?' Gert Peek goes down on his hands and knees in front of his students and scrabbles at something white in the sandy soil. When the pebble won't come away he loosens it with his green rubber boot, picks it up and wipes it down. 'River sediment, very good. This comes from the Eifel or the Ardennes', says Peek, holding it up to view.

Peek is a lecturer in soil science at Wageningen University, part of Wageningen UR, and this chilly Friday morning he is taking first year students of Forest and Nature Management on a bicycle tour of Wageningen's botanical gardens and woods. This rounds off a series of lectures and practicals and is intended to provide them with more insight into the relationships between landscapes, soils, hydrology and land use. 'And what sort of tree is that, the one with the scaly bark? Yes, an acacia, one of the loveliest of trees. When it blossoms in May-June, you smell perfume. Then you really should come and study here.' Peek delivers his story with great zeal, even though he was telling exactly the same

thing to another group an hour ago. He never has to ask his students to stop talking; they listen enthralled. 'He can even make a handful of soil interesting. His enthusiasm makes it easier for me to follow his lessons', says Sophie Keizer later, before getting onto her bike. Most teachers are much more serious and duller, adds Simone Lohuizen.

The many examples with which Peek livens up his lectures are not just entertaining, but also help you to understand the subject matter. 'Those examples come to mind spontaneously when you read over your notes', says Kinga Corbet. When she saw a ditch with a high water level from the train recently, Simone was reminded of what Peek had said about ditches. 'Things like that never happen to me with other teachers' she says.

Later in the afternoon Peek meets the students on the Grebbe dyke, where he reviews what they have seen that day. The students – their hands and noses red from the cold – fill in the last six questions on their forms. 'Hand in your answer sheet. You can win a bottle of wine with it.' Peek has five bottles

to give away. 'We want to enthuse them in any way we can, especially with a general module like this.'

Peek won a prize for his teaching at Wageningen eleven years ago, but he feels even more honoured by this prize, which is awarded by students. The election is organized annually by the Wageningen University Fund to reward outstanding teachers and highlight the importance of good education at Wageningen University. The prize goes to the teacher with the most student votes.

RENT A BUS

'Fortunately, education has regained some of its status in the last couple of years', says Peek. The Executive board now allocates a total of one million euros to the 25 best modules and the 25 best teachers. 'This means that as a teacher I bring funding into the chair group, so people look at me differently.' Peek wants to use the sum of 2,500 euros for educational purposes that comes with this prize for field trips and nice books for students. 'Students sometimes ask me to run an extra field trip at the weekend, and now I can at least rent a bus.' ■

