

Bridge-builder fosters diversity

In March this year Niels Louwaars received the Outstanding Alumnus Award from University Fund Wageningen. Louwaars is a role model for professionals and researchers in the seed sector, said the jury. He manages to bring stakeholders together in this important sector for the Netherlands.

TEXT YVONNE DE HILSTER PHOTO BRAM BELLONI

It was good to hear that people think so highly of him that they had taken the trouble to nominate him for the Outstanding Alumnus Award, says Niels Louwaars (1958). 'But who am I to receive that?' he had wondered. Only after all the accolades and many warm responses after the award ceremony did he think on his way home: 'how lovely'. The Alumnus Award is conferred once every three years on a mid-career alumnus who has achieved something exceptional with his or her 'Wageningen' expertise, serving as a role model. Louwaars graduated in Plant Breeding at Wageningen in 1982, and got a PhD on the

impact of policy on seed systems in 2007. Between 1991 and 2011 he worked at various institutes in Wageningen, for the last eight years of that period at the Centre for Genetic Resources, the Netherlands. Louwaars was then appointed director of Plantum, the Dutch branch organization for plant propagation material (sowing seed, seedlings and cuttings). The jury praised Louwaars for the way his work contributes to collaboration between government, industry and research institutes. He is well-regarded internationally as a player in the field of seed systems, plant breeding and intellectual property. 'Niels is a bridge-builder and a role model

for other professionals in the Wageningen domain.'

NEVER BLACK AND WHITE

In 1975, Louwaars came to Wageningen because he wanted to do 'something green'. 'At secondary school I wrote an extended essay on the first world food conference in Rome in 1974. It might sound a bit pompous, but I wanted to be there and to make a contribution.' He opted for a degree in Plant Breeding because that sounded nice and difficult, with lots of mathematics and genetics involved. An elective course on sociology offered him a typically Wageningen culture shock, in a positive sense. 'We had to come up with a good question on the topic of the class. For a plant breeder who always had to come up with the right answers, that was an eye-opener.' Louwaars still tends to seek contact with other disciplines because connecting with other ways of thinking generates new insights. He loves discussions. 'Nothing is ever black and white, entirely good or bad. You have to try to understand each other

UNIVERSITY FUND WAGENINGEN

The Outstanding Alumnus Award is one of the prizes with which the University Fund Wageningen rewards excellence. The prize is awarded every three years, taking turns with the Research Award and the Press Award. The Fund also awards the Sustainable Entrepreneur Prize every three years. On an annual basis the teacher of the year is announced and dissertation prizes are awarded.
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material to its diversity. Each company is different in motivation, culture and strategy, so between them they serve all the niches of the market.' Secondly, there are the exciting technological innovations. 'All the molecular knowledge in plant breeding nowadays enables us to use a much bigger range of parent plants than we could 30 years ago, and to select interesting plants more

'New methods are subject to close political scrutiny'

efficiently. Many new methods are subject to close political scrutiny, however. But what would we prefer: to grow a disease-resistant crop using new techniques or to spray it with pesticides 16 times? If you start regulating all the new methods, such as gene-editing techniques, in the same way as genetic modification (GM), you can only use those methods for the very large-scale crops in the world, so they will only be used by the biggest plant-breeding companies. Those are dilemmas that society needs to ponder.'

Much to Louwaars' regret, knowledge about plant breeding among the general public is very limited, in spite of the enormous interest in food. 'So how can you conduct a good public discussion about breeding methods, for example? The word 'natural' is used a lot. But agriculture is not natural. Nature would never plant 160,000 bean plants on one hectare. Agriculture does make use of the laws of nature, in the service of human beings. And plant breeding does that too.' How do we create the space for people to start discussion these important issues openly and help them come out of the trenches, wonders Louwaars with a sigh. 'There is a nice task for Wageningen there.' ■

by seeing each other's point of view. If you do that you don't get embroiled in conflicts so easily. If that makes people call me a bridge-builder, that's fine with me, but it doesn't mean I always seek consensus and never take a position.'

Louwaars hopes, for instance, that the European Commission will draw up an action plan to make sure patents on plants do not hamper innovation in plant breeding. 'Without access to genetic diversity you can't make the improvements to crops

that you need with a view to changing agricultural systems, addressing climate change and meeting consumer demands.'

FORCES FOR INNOVATION

Louwaars points out two important developments in today's seed sector. One is the concentration in the sector. 'It brings forces for innovation together and that is crucial, but there are limits to it,' says Louwaars. 'The Dutch sector partly owes its position as the biggest exporter of plant propagation