

Phytochemical Society of Europe Silver Medal Laureate 2007 Prof. Dr. August Wilhelm Alfermann (Düsseldorf, Germany)

Prof. Willi Alfermann has been active on behalf of the PSE since he became a member in 1989. Born on the 1st August 1942 in Bonn (Germany), he studied Biology at the Universities of Bonn and Würzburg, before completing his PhD thesis at the University of Tübingen. At this time he developed his interests in plant *in vitro* cultures and plant natural products, investigating the formation of anthocyanins in a callus culture of *Daucus carota*. In Tübingen, his main research topic became the production and biotransformation of cardiac glycosides by suspension culture cells of *Digitalis lanata*. These could very efficiently 12 β -hydroxylate (methyl)digitoxin to (methyl)digoxin, an important compound in the treatment of heart disorders. Willi Alfermann was one of the pioneers of the cultivation of plant cell cultures in bioreactors, working to scale up the production of cardiac glycosides to volumes of several hundred litres. After his “habilitation”, he became a full professor at the Institute for Developmental and Molecular Plant Biology at the Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf in 1986, where his main research has been lignan biosynthesis and accumulation by cell and organ cultures of *Linum* species. Podophyllotoxin derivatives accumulate to high levels in these cultures, which might be useful for the production of these important anti-cancer compounds. He has also carried out biochemical and molecular research of lignan biosyntheses. Other fields of investigation followed: the formation of rosmarinic acid in *Coleus blumei*, hypericins in *Hypericum*, salicylic acid derivatives in *Salix*, diterpenoids in *Salvia miltiorrhiza*, tropane alkaloids in hairy roots of Solanaceae species, taxanes in *Taxus* cell cultures. Having reached his 65th birthday, he retired on August 1st 2007 and plans to spend his retirement writing scientific books on his favourite subjects.

It is almost impossible to enumerate all the diploma and doctoral students or postdoctoral researchers coming from all over the world that have joined Willi Alfermann’s group over the years and who have contributed under his guidance to many scientific publications and contributions to scientific meetings.

Willi Alfermann was the Vice-Chairman or Chairman of the PSE from 1994 to 2000. In 1996, together with Robert Verpoorte, he organised the first Young Scientists’ Meeting (YSM) in the former cloister of Rolduc (The Netherlands). The immediate success of the Young Scientists’ Meeting format led to further bi-annual, then (from 2004) annual meetings at different locations in Europe. In April 2003, he co-organized the first and very successful PSE-meeting on lignans in Walberberg (Germany).

One of the main attributes of Willi Alfermann is that he is always willing to listen to younger scientists and to support them in every possible way. If you talk to people at scientific meetings they very often recall how they have been helped by Willi Alfermann. He has thus always been a “signpost” of the PSE, of which the most important aim and task is to support young scientists in their scientific career. To award the PSE silver medal to Willi Alfermann on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the PSE and, by coincidence, his 65th birthday, is a sign of thanks for his long-term commitment to the Phytochemical Society of Europe.

Professor Maike Petersen
Chair of the PSE 2004–2006
E-mail address: petersen@staff.uni-marburg.de

Available online 19 November 2007



Prof. Willi Alfermann is presented with his silver medal by Maike Petersen