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A green thumb — and more University's plant manager keeps teaching alive, too

Deon Nontelle has reason to be proud. For more than 30 years, she has maintained a high level of enthusiasm and expectations while teaching biology to UW-L students.

Since 1970, Nontelle has never missed a lab or lecture — even though during that time she received treatment for a brain tumor. Over those three decades, she has ranked first or second in student evaluations of biology department faculty and staff. And, her list of accomplishments of improving biology general education instruction is second to none. Nontelle, '67 & '75, was recognized by her colleagues for her enthusiasm and accomplishments with the 2003 Academic Staff Excellence Award.

"Teaching is the interactive process of simultaneously inspiring curiosity and providing guidance," says Nontelle. While students need the initiative to learn, teachers must bring thorough knowledge and create a challenging, comfortable learning environment, she notes.

Her greatest challenge is motivating students. "Enthusiasm is contagious and even if the students do not share this enthusiasm, they usually admire people

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who are excited about what they study," Nontelle explains.

If a student has trouble, Nontelle encourages them to work with her one-on-one. "Classroom instruction is not the place where teaching responsibility ends," she notes. "I realize that not everyone is comfortable with science and I try to find what type of study habits will work for each of them."

Her style has been noticed. "Deon is patient, helpful and concerned with the well-being for her students, spending large amounts of time assisting students outside of lecture," wrote colleagues Mark Sandheinrich and Tom Volk in nominating her for the award. "It is rare to pass her office and not find her patiently helping a student with biology."

Nontelle continuously seeks to improve and help students. Each semester, she asks students to complete questionnaires about course content and

instruction. She also asks about their study habits and recommendations to others taking the course. Nontelle compiles the comments and has created a "Study Hints" sheet for students.

Along with her lab and classroom teaching, Nontelle is director of the university's greenhouse. When she took over in 1993, she immediately began putting plants on a maintenance program and eventually rid the greenhouse of pests using environmentally-friendly insecticides. Now, she's responsible for keeping around 1,100 plants of more than 100 species green not only in the greenhouse, but also in the third and fourth hallways of Cowley Hall.

"Science is an exciting world and I love opening that world to my students," says Nontelle. "My students really respond to my enthusiastic style of teaching. They keep me feeling young."