# the Leaflet

VOLUME 27 • ISSUE 1 • SPRING 2025

## ANNOUNCING THE FUTURE FORWARD CAMPAIGN FOR THE DANFORTH CENTER

*The Leaflet is a publication for partners, friends, and supporters of the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center.*

DONALD DANFORTH
PLANT SCIENCE CENTER

Leaflet Vol. 27 Issue 1 Spring 2025

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**OUR MISSION**

**Improve the human condition through plant science**

**Feed the hungry and improve human health**

**Preserve and renew our environment**

**Enhance our region as a world center for plant science**

Printed on paper from sustainably managed forests with 10% post-consumer content.

**Cover**

*Plants are the future and plant science is leading the way. Learn more about how plants can feed the world and sustain the planet in this issue.*

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**Credits**


*The Leaflet* is a biannual publication for partners, friends, and supporters of the Danforth Center. Thank you.

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Dear Friends,

At the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, we believe science has the power to change the world—starting right here in St. Louis.

Today, I'm honored to share an exciting milestone in that mission: the launch of ***Future Forward***, a comprehensive campaign to raise $165 million to accelerate our impact.

*Future Forward* will fuel the breakthroughs that define the Danforth Center—cutting-edge plant science that addresses the most pressing challenges of our time: food security, environmental resilience, sustainable agriculture, and economic opportunity.

This campaign will fund critical investments in:

- **People:** Recruiting and supporting the world's top plant scientists and next-generation talent
- **Discovery:** Advancing breakthrough research to improve crops and make agriculture more resilient and sustainable
- **Innovation:** Translating science into real-world impact through technology, entrepreneurship, and global partnerships

As Chair of the Board, I'm thrilled to witness the extraordinary achievements unfolding at the Danforth Center. The energy and innovation here are nothing short of world-changing. We are not just on the map, we are becoming the global epicenter for agtech and biotech. The momentum is palpable, and it's propelling our region to new heights.

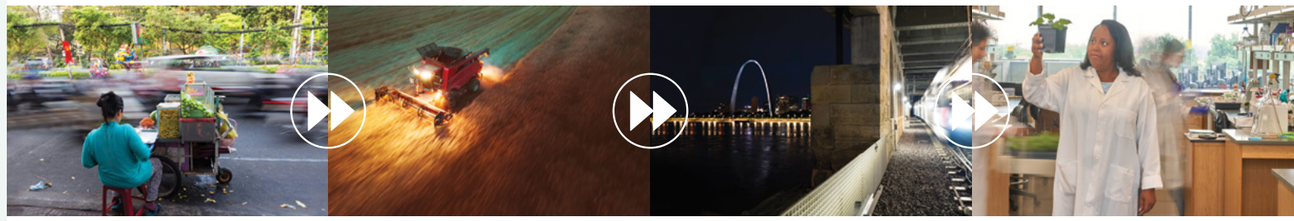
***Future Forward* is more than a campaign. It's a call to action—for those who care about feeding the world, protecting the planet, and growing the innovation-driven economy here in St. Louis.**

We invite you to join us. Together, let's move science—and our future—forward.

Warmly,

Penny Pennington
Managing Partner, Edward Jones
Chair, Danforth Center Board

P.S. Read all about the campaign starting on p. 6 of this issue.



# News & Events

## NEW BOARD MEMBERS

**Benjamin Ola Akande, PhD**, and **Marilyn Bush** have joined the Danforth Board of Directors this January. Dr. Akande is Senior Vice President, Chief Corporate Responsibility Officer, Stifel Financial, and is the current chair of the Danforth Leadership Council. Bush is President of Bank of America St. Louis and Market Executive for Business Banking, Bank of America. The appointments come as Directors Teddy Bekele, Beau Brauer, Lee Broughton, and Steve Fox depart the board at the conclusion of their terms. “We are excited to welcome Benjamin and Marilyn and grateful to Teddy, Beau, Lee, and Steve for their invaluable partnership,” said President and Chief Executive Officer Jim Carrington, PhD.

## AWARD ROUND-UP

**Elizabeth Kellogg, PhD**, the Robert E. King Distinguished Investigator at the Danforth Center and member of the National Academy of Sciences, received the Danforth Award for Plant Science. The award recognizes outstanding scientists whose exceptional contributions to plant biology, agriculture, or fields relevant to the Danforth Center have made them leaders in their field. Dr. Kellogg is among the world’s foremost experts on cereal crops and their wild relatives in the grass family.

**Katie Murphy, PhD**, principal investigator and director of the Danforth Center Phenotyping Facility has been awarded the North American Plant Phenotyping Network Early Career Award for 2025. Watch “Seeding Solutions,” a video by STL Made about Katie’s work at thestl.com.

## ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

**Allison Miller, PhD**, Danforth Center principal investigator, received the George Engelmann Interdisciplinary Award for Collaborative Science Achievement for her innovative approach to sustainable agriculture systems.

**Bing Yang, PhD**, Danforth Center principal investigator and professor at the University of Missouri – Columbia, received the James B. Eads Award for Excellence in Engineering or Technology for his work in plant genome engineering and advancing CRISPR/Cas technology for disease-resistant crops.

## EVENTS

See back cover for upcoming public events, including a nationally renowned speaker and a fundraising party you won't want to miss.

READ MORE NEWS & EVENTS AT DANFORTHCENTER.ORG.



# A New President for Plant Science: Dr. Giles Oldroyd

After an extensive international search, the Danforth Center has named Giles Oldroyd, PhD, as its next president. Oldroyd, a plant geneticist, will step into his new role on October 1. He succeeds current President and CEO James Carrington, PhD, who has led the Center since 2011.

Dr. Oldroyd comes to the Danforth Center from the University of Cambridge, UK, where he is the Russell R. Geiger Professor of Crop Science and Director of the Crop Science Centre. He is internationally recognized for his work to understand symbiotic interactions between plants and beneficial bacteria and fungi in the soil. He also leads the Enabling Nutrient Symbioses in Agriculture (ENSA) project, funded by Gates Agricultural Innovations, which seeks to develop self-fertilizing cereal crops for African farmers.

"Dr. Oldroyd is a proven leader with a passion and strong commitment for improving lives through plant science," said Penny Pennington, managing partner, Edward Jones and chair, Danforth Center Board of Directors, who led the search committee. "Under his leadership, we are confident the Danforth Center will continue to drive innovative research, foster collaboration, and expand its impact across the globe."

Born in the UK, and raised both there and in Zambia, Dr. Oldroyd completed his PhD at the University of California, Berkeley, and his postdoctoral work at Stanford University. He is one of only a few hundred scientists in the world who are elected members in both the UK’s Royal Society and the US National Academy of Sciences, the two foremost scientific organizations in the English-speaking world. The World Food Prize recently named him a Top Agri-Food Pioneer.

“Plant science is essential to tackling the global challenges we face,” said Oldroyd. “I am honored to lead this prestigious institution as we continue to deliver impact through new discoveries and technologies, ensuring the sustainable production of food and fuel.”

*Incoming Danforth Center President Dr. Giles Oldroyd chatting with Dr. Lucía Lohmann, president of the Missouri Botanical Garden.*

*Scan to see a video featuring Dr. Oldroyd:*

# FUTURE FORWARD

*Campaign for the Danforth Center*

## Future Forward

**A CAMPAIGN TO TACKLE ISSUES OF HUNGER, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND REGIONAL GROWTH**

The Danforth Center has announced this April the public launch of *Future Forward*, a bold $165 million comprehensive campaign that will harness the power of plant science to confront some of the most urgent challenges of our time—global hunger, environmental degradation, and economic opportunity.

The initiatives that this campaign supports are some of the most ambitious in the Center's history. They will support breakthrough research, fuel regional innovation, and expand access to food and sustainable farming practices across the globe. *Future Forward* is not just an investment in science—it's a commitment to a better, more prosperous future.

"The Danforth Center is uniquely capable of translating plant science discoveries into food security solutions while preserving our life-sustaining environment."

***- Jim Carrington, PhD, President and CEO***

## Driving Solutions at the Intersection of Science and Society

Through *Future Forward*, the Danforth Center will:

**1**

**Feed people.** Advance resilient, nutritious, high-yield crops through cutting-edge research and biotechnology. Food security is essential for the health and upward mobility of smallholder farmers and their families and communities. It is also essential for the stability of society. Plants hold the potential for long-term, sustainable solutions. With our partners, the Danforth Center is already delivering improved crops in Africa—and has plans to speed and scale the initiatives.

**2**

**Sustain the Earth.** Reduce agriculture's environmental impact by developing crops that store more carbon, require fewer inputs, and regenerate soil health. We cannot afford to ignore the environment, and farmers have a vital role to play in improving agriculture. They need better tools, and improved plants are key. By improving existing crops and discovering new ones, the Danforth Center can sustain the Earth while feeding the world.

**3**

**Grow our community.** Catalyze job creation and economic development through agtech innovation, start-up support, and expanded STEM education. Danforth Center scientists are making groundbreaking discoveries that form a critical foundation to address global issues of food security in a changing world. Help us create an innovation ecosystem where our discoveries lead to innovative products, stimulate economic growth, and result in our campus and region becoming the number one location for agtech innovation worldwide.

**4**

**Continue to lead.** Invest in top scientific talent, facilities, and the next generation of visionary researchers. The Danforth Center seeks to attract the best and the brightest scientists from around the world. To retain them, we must constantly improve our facilities, infrastructure, and processes. With your help, we will add new core facilities, new technologies, and the support that propels new ideas to discovery.

"This campaign reflects our strong belief in science that makes people's lives better," said John McDonnell, retired chairman, McDonnell Douglas Corporation, and *Future Forward* campaign chair. "The Danforth Center is creating the future of agriculture—and real-world impact that benefits farmers, families, and communities everywhere."

## A Call to Action

The Danforth Center invites individuals, organizations, and community partners to join this transformational effort through philanthropy, advocacy and engagement.

"*Future Forward* is not just a campaign—it's a movement," said Tom Bander, vice president of development at the Danforth Center. "We believe the future is something we build together, and we welcome all who want to join us in this journey."

**LEARN MORE**

Support the **FUTURE FORWARD** campaign.


*Cassava is a staple food crop that more than half the people in Africa depend on for their daily calories, but it is susceptible to devastating viruses.*

# A Critical Moment for Cassava—and for Farmers across Africa

*The Danforth Center's VIRCA virus-resistant cassava (at right). Kenyan farmers need it, but many may not be able get it due to federal funding cuts.*

### YEARS OF PROGRESS HANG IN THE BALANCE

Cassava is one of the world's most important crops, feeding over 800 million people across tropical regions. It can grow in impoverished soils and in drought conditions. Its starchy roots not only provide a daily source of calories, but also fuel rural economies through uses in biofuel, beverages, and processed foods. Yet cassava is under serious threat from devastating viral diseases like Cassava Brown Streak Disease (CBSD), which can destroy entire harvests without visible warning until the roots are unearthed—too late to save the crop or the season.

For nearly two decades, scientists at the Danforth Center, led by **Nigel Taylor, PhD**, Dorothy J. King Distinguished Investigator, have worked tirelessly to develop cassava varieties resistant to these crippling diseases. Thanks to the **Virus Resistant Cassava for Africa (VIRCA)** project—funded through a grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—a breakthrough brown-streak resistant cassava has now completed regulatory trials in Kenya and was poised for introduction to tens of thousands of farmers in 2026-2027.

But just as success was within reach, an unexpected policy shift struck.

### A SUDDEN SETBACK

In early 2025, as part of an abrupt overhaul of federal programs, the USAID was shuttered. Funding for the VIRCA project was terminated—immediately cutting $2.1 million in crucial final-phase support. Activities in three countries must cease altogether, and efforts in Kenya and Rwanda have been drastically scaled back. This setback jeopardizes years of progress, leaving farmers vulnerable at a moment when solutions were finally at hand.

Despite these challenges, work continues. Thanks to two newly secured collaborations—one targeting cassava whitefly and another strengthening cassava resilience in Rwanda—the Danforth Center remains committed to advancing cassava solutions. But consistent funding is vital. Breakthroughs in plant science take years to build and can be dismantled in months without stable support.

"The clampdown on scientific research funding has certainly affected the Danforth Center's work," said President and CEO Jim Carrington, noting that $2.5 million grants have been canceled, and that more than $6 million others have been delayed or paused indefinitely.

### THE HUMAN COST OF INACTION

For farmers like Josephine, a mother of five and grandmother of two in western Kenya, cassava isn't just a crop—it's survival. Each year she has watched as she lost more and more of her harvest to brown streak disease. VIRCA's resistant cassava varieties offered new hope for feeding her family and earning income at market. Now, without support, that hope is slipping away.

**FEED PEOPLE**

At this critical juncture, the Danforth Center's ***Future Forward*** campaign is more important than ever. With your renewed investment, we can ensure that hard-won scientific progress is not lost—and that farmers around the world can access the crops they need to survive and thrive. Please consider making a new, renewed, or additional gift today at **campaign.danforthcenter.org**.

*Dr. Nigel Taylor (right) visiting the "multiplier" site in Kenya where virus-resistant cassava plants are being grown for use in sale cuttings. Distribution efforts are now being scaled back in response to federal USAID funding termination.*

*Sixty percent of Kenyan smallholder farmers are women, like Josephine seen here, who grows cassava to feed her extended family – and to help send her grandchildren to school.*


*Maize has been planted on an est. 95 million acres in the US in 2025. Fine tuning plant architecture could yield big gains.*

# A Long Game with Big Returns

**RESEARCH IN CORN GENETICS POINTS THE WAY TO YIELD GAINS**

In a moment when many research programs face uncertainty, a newly published study from the Danforth Center offers a timely reminder of why sustained scientific funding matters.

Led by Principal Investigator **Andrea Eveland, PhD**, and published in *Nature Communications*, the study uncovers key genetic mechanisms that govern *pleiotropy*—a phenomenon where a single gene affects multiple traits. In maize, this can complicate breeding, since improving one trait (like leaf angle) may have unintentional effects on another (like tassel branching). Eveland's team identified regulatory variations that influence these traits early in plant development and demonstrated how they can potentially be fine-tuned independently. By mapping these genetic networks, Eveland's team developed a strategy to "decouple" traits that often conflict—unlocking new possibilities for breeders to increase crop density and productivity.

Why does this matter? Because maize is planted at massive scale—more than 90 million acres across the US each year. And when it comes to hybrid seed production, even small improvements in plant architecture can yield enormous gains. In fact, more grains of seed corn are planted annually than there are stars in the Milky Way. At that scale, "fine tuning" isn't a luxury—it's an economic imperative.

This research was funded by a National Science Foundation award that supported years of interdisciplinary work across genetics, computational biology, and plant development. It also led to 24 publications and helped train the next generation of scientists through the Danforth Center's Genotype-to-Phenotype Authentic Research Experience, giving high school and community college students hands-on exposure to real-world science.

In an era of tightening budgets, Eveland's work offers clear proof: large-scale multidisciplinary science takes time—but delivers lasting impact.

*Principal Investigator Dr. Andrea Eveland and Research Scientist Dr. Edoardo Bertolini study the genetics of corn architecture, revealing new yield enhancements for breeders.*

"Our goal is to turn deep genetic insights into real-world breeding strategies—so we can grow more food, with fewer resources, on the same amount of land."

***- Andrea Eveland, PhD, Danforth Center Principal Investigator***



# Breakthrough Partnership for Soil Health

**INDUSTRY COLLABORATION AIMS TO SCALE NATURE'S UNDERGROUND ALLIES**

In today's funding environment, scientific partnerships are more important than ever. A new collaboration between the Danforth Center and Enhanced Nature (EN)—a subsidiary of Symbiotic Sciences—is a promising example of how industry and research can work together to advance sustainable agriculture.

The project centers on arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF), microscopic organisms that live in tight symbiosis with plant roots. AMFs help plants absorb nutrients like phosphorus and nitrogen and improve their tolerance to drought and other environmental stresses. In return, plants provide carbon compounds that allow the fungi to thrive.

"About 70% of all plants form natural partnerships with AMF," said **Dr. Armando Bravo**, Danforth Center principal investigator. "They're a cornerstone of healthy soils and sustainable farming—but producing them efficiently at scale has been a major barrier."

Bravo's research focuses on the biology of plant–fungal symbiosis, while EN brings deep expertise in large-scale AMF production. Together, they aim to optimize new methods for growing AMF in vitro—advancing both fundamental science and practical applications.

The global market for AMF is growing fast, with demand rising from organic and regenerative agriculture sectors. As public funding grows more uncertain, partnerships like this offer a promising path forward—enabling researchers to pursue long-term goals while helping industry scale the tools of sustainability.

"In this case," Bravo noted, "science and industry are symbiotic too."

*Dr. Armando Bravo (center) in the greenhouse with team members. Their work to improve production of AMFs for better soil health has found a new industry partner.*

**NSF DELAY DISRUPTS RESEARCH AND STUDENT PROGRAMS**

In May, it was reported that the National Science Foundation would "stop awarding new grants and funding existing ones" indefinitely. The NSF is one of the Danforth Center's top three funding agencies. Already the Center has experienced delays. For example, the incremental funding for the 2025 summer Research Experiences for Undergraduate (REU) program has been delayed with no timeline for activation. More details in the next issue.

GROW OUR COMMUNITY.

*Inaugural Kemper Fellow Olivia Gomez with, from left, Danforth Center President Jim Carrington, David Kemper, Dr. Jim Umen, and Jenny Hoelzer, Commerce Bank Vice President and Manager of Community Relations & Events*

# Investing in Tomorrow's Scientists

**KEMPER FOUNDATION'S FUTURE FORWARD GIFT SUPPORTS GRADUATE RESEARCH**

The Danforth Center's *Future Forward* campaign is not only accelerating innovation in plant science—it's investing in the people who will carry that mission into the future. A new endowed fellowship from the **William T. Kemper Foundation** reflects this commitment and advances core campaign priorities like sustaining the Earth.

"We're delighted to work with our long-time partners at the Danforth Center in expanding their research to find solutions for major environmental issues such as phosphate pollution of our wetlands and river systems," said David Kemper, executive chairman, Commerce Bancshares, Inc.

The William T. Kemper Fellowship will support outstanding PhD students whose research has the potential to address major challenges in agriculture and sustainability. The inaugural recipient is **Olivia Gomez**, a fifth-year PhD student in the Plant and Microbial Biosciences program at Washington University in St. Louis.

At the Danforth Center, Gomez conducts her research in the lab of **James Umen, PhD**, where she studies how algae store phosphate—an essential nutrient in agriculture. Phosphate is a critical ingredient in fertilizer, but crops absorb only a portion of it; the rest often runs off into waterways, contributing to toxic algal blooms. Meanwhile, global phosphate reserves are finite and declining.

Gomez's research aims to uncover natural mechanisms that could inform the development of crops that store phosphate more efficiently and reduce waste.

She attributes her interest in plants to her childhood: "I moved seven times between three countries, and I noticed plants have different adaptations in different places." Through her work, Gomez hopes to improve global food security by improving crop resilience to disease and environmental stresses.

*Inaugural Kemper Fellow Olivia Gomez studies phosphate uptake in algae with an eye to discovering the mechanisms that could make the process more efficient and reduce waste and pollution.*



*William H. Danforth Fellow Samantha Nuzzi (left) in the growth chamber with Dr. Tessa Burch-Smith and a colleague.*

# A Fellowship Rooted in Discovery

**SAMANTHA NUZZI NAMED 2025 WHD PLANT SCIENCE FELLOW**

The Danforth Center is proud to announce that **Samantha Nuzzi** has been named the **2025 William H. Danforth Plant Science Fellow**, an award that recognizes outstanding PhD students whose work holds strong promise for advancing plant science.

A fifth-year PhD student in the Division of Plant Science at the University of Missouri—Columbia, Samantha conducts her research in the lab of **Tessa Burch-Smith, PhD**, at the Danforth Center. Her focus: understanding how plant cells communicate with one another—and how those communication systems might be hijacked by viruses.

"Cell-to-cell communication is essential," Samantha explains. "Without it, plants can't grow, defend themselves, or send signals properly." While plant cells are separated by walls, they exchange information through tiny pores called *plasmodesmata*. These structures form during cell division—but can also form outside of it, through mechanisms that remain poorly understood.

That's where Samantha's research comes in. "Viruses exploit these connections—and in some cases, even alter them," she says. "If we can understand how plasmodesmata are formed, we may be able to strengthen the plant's defenses against infection."

Her work relies heavily on advanced imaging tools, and she collaborates closely with **Kirk Czymmek, PhD**, and the Danforth Center's **Advanced Bioimaging Laboratory** to visualize plant structures in remarkable detail. "We're pushing the boundaries of what's possible," she says. "And it's critical for improving how we respond to viral threats in agriculture."

Originally from South Florida, Samantha credits a curious childhood for her scientific path. "I used to poke creatures at the beach with a stick," she laughs. "Now I do the same thing—with a million-dollar microscope."

"We're pushing the boundaries of what's possible. And it's critical for improving how we respond to viral threats in agriculture"

***- Samantha Nuzzi, 2025 WHD Fellow***

**GROW OUR COMMUNITY**

The future of our planet depends on a new generation of scientists—innovators whose discoveries will shape a healthier, more resilient world. Endowed fellowships are especially critical to their support. The ***Future Forward*** campaign is committed to empowering people by supporting emerging scientists whose work will shape the future of agriculture, sustainability, and global food security. Learn more: **campaign.danforthcenter.org.**


*From left, Drs. Czymmek and Burch-Smith, in the Advanced Bioimaging Laboratory. Their recent grant funds protocol development for a new and powerful microscope.*

"Better imaging means better science—and better science helps us grow the food people need."

***- Tessa Burch-Smith, PhD, Danforth Center Principal Investigator***

## Inside the Secret Life of Cells

**NEXT-GEN MICROSCOPY LEADERSHIP FOR THE WORLD**

What if we could see inside a plant cell the way a surgeon sees inside the human body?

That's the kind of leap Danforth Center scientists are making, thanks to a $1.5 million grant last year from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and a powerful new microscope called the Hydra Plasma FIB-SEM that was funded in part by donor support. One of just a handful such cutting-edge tools in the country, this microscope is now up and running in the Center's Advanced Bioimaging Laboratory (ABL).

With it, Danforth researchers **Tessa Burch-Smith, PhD**, and **Kirk Czymmek, PhD**, are leading a groundbreaking collaboration with Stanford University to develop protocols for capturing 3D images of plant cells at the nanoscale—so small it's a thousand times thinner than a human hair.

It's not just about the wow factor. These images can help us answer some of the most important questions in plant science: How do healthy cells respond to disease? What happens at the molecular level when a plant is stressed by drought or heat?

To get clear answers, samples must be frozen with incredible precision—a tricky task with plants. Their tough walls and watery insides make cryopreservation especially hard. The team is committed to developing best practices, sharing their methods widely, and training scientists on the technology, multiplying their impact around the world.

This work is a bold example of the Center's *Future Forward* campaign promise in action. The Danforth Center continues to lead by investing in cutting-edge tools, heading global collaborations, and accelerating discoveries that help people and the planet.

**CONTINUE TO LEAD.**

If you believe science drives innovation, strengthens our economy, and secures our future, now is the time to speak up. Contact your federal elected officials to express concern about cuts to scientific funding—and the lasting damage they cause to our region and our nation. Visit **usa.gov/elected-officials** to find contact information.



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## Don't-Miss Events


**Aug. 27**

**Dr. Cary Fowler, father of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault**


**Sept. 26**

**All are welcome to the Young Friends' Fundraiser**

**EVENT TICKETS & RESERVATIONS:**