

PEOPLE

Theory to Practice: Plant Doctors from NTU Plant Teaching Hospital Have Their Feet Planted Firmly on the Ground



Ting-Hsuan Hung, President of NTU Plant Teaching Hospital on a leafy vegetable health management workshop held for local farmers.

Have you ever wondered how plants receive medical treatment when they are ill? Professor Ting-Hsuan Hung of the Department of Plant Pathology and Microbiology has the answer. As the President of the NTU Plant Teaching Hospital, he trains the next generation of plant doctors by making sure that the students are taken into the fields by the faculty to offer medical treatment to plant "patients" all over Taiwan.

Based in NTU's Yunlin branch, resident plant doctor trainee Huai-Jung Cheng and Tsung-Han Lee strive to help farmers solve problems while keeping an eye on food safety for consumers. For example, Lee has assisted the farmers in discovering the reason for unusually small peanuts this year. It turned out the problem was low nitrogen-fixing bacteria rates in the soil. Thanks to the dedication of the plant doctors over the years, contacts of the Plant Hospital can now be found in 20 towns in Yunlin, which offer free personalized farm visits, building friendships between the plant doctors and local farmers.

Taiwan's climate and intensive farming methods exacerbate the problem of plant diseases and pests. As the world-leading expert on Citrus Huanglongbing, President Hung has found many solutions to improve the quality of this locally grown citrus. "If you take things seriously, people will take you seriously." This is Hung's motto as well as the lesson he learned from helping the farmers for over a decade. Besides personalized farm visits, NTU Plant Teaching Hospital organizes workshops to help the farmers reduce the amount of pesticide they use. A farmer once told him: "You helped me reduce my pesticide use by two thirds!"

President Hung's ultimate goal is to train more agricultural generalists to cross the gap between theory and practice. He believes going into the field is vital for taking good care of the land while improving farmers' livelihood. "We can only choose to tackle the agricultural problems, or the farmers will suffer," he insists. So far, there are about 100 plant doctors serving farmers all over Taiwan. The positive feedback from local farmers is what motivates them to carry on. Appreciating that plant medicine research is intertwined with real life, the doctors will continue their outreach.



Professor Hung and students from Department of Plant Pathology and Microbiology on a farm visit.