

MIZZOU

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Planting passion

Researcher and teacher Chris Pires receives mentor award

With his sneakers, cargo shorts and rumpled shirt, Chris Pires, an assistant professor of biological sciences and an investigator in the [Bond Life Sciences Center](#), could easily be mistaken for one of his students. But as Pires scribbles notes while the students debate methods of building evolutionary trees in his Phylogenetic Methods and Applications seminar, it becomes obvious that he's a step or three ahead of them.

The Office of Undergraduate Research recognized Pires as an outstanding undergraduate research mentor in April 2008. Students submit nomination letters for the mentors they feel have had the biggest impact on their education.

Of course, teaching is only part of faculty life. More than half of Pires' time is devoted to his research on Brassica, the genus that includes cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, brussels sprouts, kale and kohlrabi. Pires often scans his classes for potential research assistants. He has a soft spot for those who may not think of themselves as doing research.

Junior Megan Pallo of Independence, Mo., is one such student. An education major planning to teach high school biology, she never thought she'd work in a genetics lab. She first met Pires when taking Plant Taxonomy. "There were 40 or 50 students in that class," she says. "Within the first few weeks, he knew everybody's name."



Chris Pires stays busy involving undergraduates in plant research projects.

He takes the time to get to know his students and he avoids unproductive class hierarchy. “I don’t feel like I’ve ever been treated like an undergrad,” Pallo says.

Sometimes Pires wants to help his students too much, but he is getting better at navigating the fine line between of instruction and independence, he says. He used to come in to the greenhouse on the weekends to water students’ neglected plants. Dead plants equal delayed research projects and wasted time.

Now, even though it drives him crazy, he forces himself to let the plants wither. “The lab is where they learn that science involves lots of failure,” he says.

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