
In Memorium

Patricia Berjak 1939 – 2015

Renowned scientist and Vice-President of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf), Prof Patricia Berjak, has passed away. She was Professor Emeritus and Head of the Centre for Plant Germplasm Conservation Research in the School of Life Sciences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, where she worked for most of her distinguished 40-year academic career. Prof Berjak had been a long-serving member of the ASSAf Council since 2006 and was elected Vice-President in 2008. She was a loyal and dedicated Council member, serving the Academy in various capacities, most recently as the Chair of the Human Resources Committee of Council. She will be sadly missed by her fellow Councillors, who will miss her incisive intellect and commitment to the values of the Academy. She was a world leader in the study of seeds and achieved significant success in her career. She obtained a BSc degree at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1962 and graduated as a biochemist before doing a Masters degree in medicine. She became a cell biologist focused on seed biology after being introduced to seeds and electron microscopy by the biologist-tutor Trevor Villiers in the late 1960s.

Prof Berjak's research was widely acclaimed. She was an elected Member of ASSAf, a Fellow of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the Royal Society of South Africa, and of The World Academy of Sciences (TWAS). In 2001 Prof Berjak was awarded the Silver Medal of the South African Association of Botanists for research excellence. In 2004, she received the Department of Science and Technology's Distinguished Woman Scientist Award for consistent contributions to science. This was followed by the award of the National Order of Mapungubwe (Silver) in 2006 and then the National Research Foundation's Lifetime Achiever Award in 2008. Most recently, in 2010, she was honoured by the eThekweni Municipality (Durban) with its Living Legends award for her seed science research.

Over and above her awards, Prof Berjak has been an inspiring and generous role-model and mentor to a whole generation of women scientists locally and globally.

Together with her husband and fellow scientist, Prof Norman Pammenter, Pat Berjak has supervised generations of South African students, many of whom have carved out distinguished careers for themselves. ASSAf extends its sincere condolences to Prof Pammenter on the passing of his life partner of almost 50 years.

