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UCT researcher to receive L'Oréal- UNESCO Life Sciences award

Professor Jill Farrant, the Research Chair in Plant Molecular Physiology in the Department of Molecular and Cell Biology at the University of Cape Town, is one of the five exceptional women scientists from around the world who will receive the 2012 L'Oréal-UNESCO Awards in Life Sciences for 2012. She will receive her award and US\$100 000 prize money at a ceremony at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris in March 2012.

"Professor Jill Farrant is a truly deserving laureate," said Professor Danie Visser, deputy vice-chancellor for research at UCT. "This is yet another reminder of the telling impact that women have at UCT and, as the award demonstrates, on the world."

Plants that survive climate change

Professor Farrant was cited for her work on "discovering how plants survive under dry conditions", according to the announcement released on 8 November 2011 by the selection panel. She is renowned for her work on resurrection or desiccation-tolerant plants, which can withstand prolonged drought or water loss – a looming climate change issue. These plants will spring to life once they are exposed to water again.

Such work could have a profound impact on the world as it deals with the effects of climate change. Professor Farrant said: "I believe in the potential outcomes of my work, ie the ultimate production of drought tolerant crops – with the aim of addressing food security needs in Africa, which will become more important as climate change (and increasing droughts) continues to impact on agriculture."

She added that her work is part of a team effort. "I have worked with amazing students and collaborators who have helped put me on this map," she said. "I might have initiated the research, and had many of the ideas that have been tested and

published, but I alone did not do the work that has enabled me to receive such an award.”

Professor Farrant is the fourth South African, and the third at UCT, to receive the L’Oréal-UNESCO award. Previous laureates are Professor Valerie Mizrahi (2000), who is now the director of the Institute of Infectious Disease and Molecular Medicine at UCT; and Professor Jennifer Thomson (2004) in the Department of Molecular and Cell Biology.

The L’Oréal-UNESCO award is the latest in a series of honours for Professor Farrant. She is also a past recipient of the Harry Oppenheimer Memorial Trust Fellowship Award and the first woman in the life sciences at UCT to receive an A-rating from the National Research Foundation. She featured in *Mail & Guardian’s Book of South African Women*, and in 2010 she received the South African Distinguished Women in Science Award from the Department of Science & Technology.

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