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JILL FARRANT

FAMINE FIGHTER



In 2012 Jill Farrant received a L'Oréal-Unesco Women in Science award, by some estimations just one tier below a Nobel, for her work with so-called resurrection plants. They survive long periods in a dessicated state, having lost 95 percent of their water content, but 'green up' after being watered. The goal of her research is to develop drought-tolerant crops using targeted biotechnology, attempting to 'switch on' genes already in the plant. Mindful of the need to make the

products of such research safe, Farrant is also chairing a study by the SA Academy of Sciences to assess biosafety and biosecurity in this country (the findings will be published in 2014). By the time Farrant came to study these Lazarus-like plants, their existence had been noted but little understood. Nobody realised their potential for preventing famine. Her personal story has a miraculous dimension too: four years ago she suffered a traumatic brain injury. She made a full recovery – except for losing her sense of taste and smell. Farrant may be two senses down, but she's still the first woman in life sciences at UCT to receive the A-rating – academics who are 'recognised by their peers as leading international scholars in their field'. Back to those plants... Farrant estimates we could be about 15 years off drought-tolerant crops. When it happens, expect the Nobel committee to come knocking on her door.