Yvonne Aitken

1911-2004

Yvonne Aitken joined Victorian Graduate Women (now Graduate Women Victoria) in 1937 and remained a strong supporter of our association until her death. She left a substantial bequest to our scholarship program. The Yvonne Aitken Scholarship has been awarded every year since 2008. This account of her life is taken from *Australian Women's History Forum* – the Demeter's Daughters exhibition.

Yvonne Aitken made major contributions to the science of plant breeding. Her goal, along with others in the field, was to produce a greater range of consumable crops for people and animals. She contributed to the search for better crop and pasture species for Australia by increasing our understanding of genetic factors within a species that control reproductive development in different seasons and climates.

She was born in 1911 in Horsham, Victoria, the elder daughter of David Aitken and Arabella Miller, and was educated at the Convents of Mercy in the several country towns where her bank manager father worked.

Yvonne was one of the first female students in the Faculty of Agricultural Studies at the University of Melbourne, graduating with Honours in 1936. She immediately started a Masters project studying the effect of the length of day on the flowering behaviour of plants. This proved to be the start of a life-long fascination with the reaction of field peas to climate and day length, which culminated in the award of a Doctor of Agricultural Science and the publication of a definitive monograph and textbook, Flowering, Time, Climate and Genotype, published by Melbourne University Press in 1974 and contribution to a textbook for students. She first studied the effect of daily temperature and photoperiod on a group of nine well-known agricultural species (three legumes, six cereals and grasses) sown at Melbourne (latitude 38°S) at intervals during the year. Over 30 years, she planted the same varieties at locations all over the world to test extremes of daylight, temperature and altitude, and visited the sites during her holidays. These travels included as Central Asia and Patagonia, Alaska and Mexico. Collaborations within Australia combined with these study leave and sabbatical trips in 1955, 1963 and 1975 resulted in Aitken's work covering several continents and 10 distinctly different climates. An avid artist she kept pictorial records of her work and field explorations.

She became a world authority on predicting geographic and climatic limits for plant varieties. She also collected an enormous number of pea varieties to preserve genetic diversity for plant breeders of the future. The early cultivars of peas available to include in rotations with

cereals were not well suited to the short growing season in northern Victoria, but thanks to Yvonne's work, a superior strain was developed and is widely used by Victorian farmers.
Yvonne spent her working life at the University of Melbourne as a research assistant, demonstrator, lecturer and reader. She joined the Faculty's permanent staff in 1945 and became a senior lecturer in 1957. She was a reader in plant sciences (1957-77). Although retired, she continued her work at the University in the Department of Crop Production, within the Institute of Land and Food Resources as an honorary senior associate – an appointment she held for 27 years.

Yvonne died in November 2004, aged 94. She had been associated with the University for 74 years, in particular with Janet Clarke Hall, where she was first a student, then senior tutor and Vice Principal for 25 years and had a formative influence on many generations of students. She was honoured by the college as a Foundation Fellow. In recognition of her scientific contributions, she was elected a Fellow of the Institute of Agricultural Science and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Victoria. In 1989 she was made a Member of the Order of Australia.