



Robin R. Bellinder

August 7, 1945 – November 13, 2015

Dr. Robin Redfern Bellinder of Ithaca, a Professor of Horticulture at Cornell University for 31 years and an international expert in weed control in vegetable crops, died unexpectedly on Nov. 13, 2015. She was 70 years old.

Dr. Bellinder was born in Astoria, Oregon on Aug. 7, 1945, the first child of Capt. Richard “Dick” Dunning Redfern and Dorothy A. Warren. The family was on the West Coast for her father’s deployment with the U.S. Coastal Artillery during World War II. They returned to Michigan after the war and settled in the northern village of Bellaire, where she and her younger brother Tod spent much of their youth. The family moved to Traverse City, Michigan, and then Lansing, where she graduated from Lansing Eastern High School in 1963.

Dr. Bellinder took a serpentine path to her Cornell professorship. She began studying at the University of Michigan in 1963. When she expressed interest in a degree in the sciences, her advisor told her that, based on her math and science test scores, she should instead get a degree in English. She left school shortly after to explore the world, hitchhiking through much of the U.S. and Europe and ending up in Uppsala, Sweden in 1966. She returned to her studies in 1968 but took another break in 1969 to travel for a year overland from Sweden to India, Singapore and back. She had her daughter, Jessica, in 1971, and as a single parent resumed her studies and earned a degree in English from Uppsala University in 1972. She returned to the U.S. in 1974 and, after several years working in the hospitality industry in northern Michigan, she returned to college and completed her bachelor’s degree in science at Michigan State University in 1979. She went on to get her master’s and, in 1984, doctoral degrees from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia. In the same year, before her graduation ceremony, she began working as an assistant professor of horticulture at Cornell.

Dr. Bellinder balanced her obligations as a graduate student and professor with her role as a single parent in an era and professional arena where this was uncommon. Although money was tight when she was a student, she maintained an unwavering commitment to nurturing her daughter. During the relocation from East Lansing to Blacksburg in December 1979, she loaded a Michigan Christmas tree on top of everything in the U-Haul to make sure the family would have a real Christmas celebration when they arrived.

At Cornell, Dr. Bellinder was a passionate supporter of the Land Grant mission. Her research program focused on weed management for vegetable crops. One of few women in her field at that time, she became a national and international leader. She published research results widely in peer reviewed publications, as well as publications that advised growers about her work's practical applications. She served as president of the Northeastern Weed Science Society and, in 2005, was named the recipient of Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences award for outstanding accomplishments in applied research. She will be remembered as a weed scientist who ardently and tirelessly supported New York vegetable growers. She made sure "her growers" had all the tools they needed for success. When New York table beet growers lost the only effective herbicide they had, she worked tirelessly to provide documentation and letters of support to get the herbicide labeled for one more year.

Although Robin worked with herbicides, she was involved in all aspects of weed management. A sabbatical to Sweden 25 years ago opened her eyes to European tillage equipment. Once she returned, she imported lots of new equipment to demonstrate. She trialed materials that could be used by organic growers like clove oil and vinegar. Although not every one of those was effective, she certainly had the most aromatic plots at the research farm.

Robin did many on-farm trials where a grower would prepare and plant the land and Robin would apply the treatments. She would visit these farms from very early in the morning through the evening, weekends included. Growers knew that the results from these trials would help not only themselves but also all those in the industry. She worked closely with Cornell Cooperative Extension educators, helping to train them in weed management when they were first hired and then becoming a valued colleague and friend. As one of her extension colleagues stated, "We stand on the shoulders of giants, and Robin was one of them".

For the last ten years she added undergraduate teaching to her many responsibilities. She enthusiastically taught "Principles of Vegetable Production", providing students with her insight and experiences from around the world. Dr. Bellinder was also a mentor to dozens of graduate students over the years and took great pride in helping to educate the next generation of weed scientists. One student remembers her as "very hands-on and involved, always present for plantings, herbicide applications or harvests. She was truly someone that worked with and alongside her crew. In all matters that she undertook, however small they were, she was a very genuine person. Even a simple inquiry, or request would receive her wholehearted and diligent consideration. And as much as she expected only the highest level of commitment from her crew, Dr. Bellinder was also a very fair and empathetic person. She was as accommodative as she was curious, always willing to adjust and take happiness in experiences themselves."

Dr. Bellinder was active in international programs, traveling to South America and Asia. She had the uncanny ability to notice, question and grasp the minutest details in geography or culture. Her work in India was life changing. She showed how backpack sprayers could be used to safely and economically apply small doses of herbicides. She said "anyone who thinks farmers in India should control weeds without herbicides should spend an afternoon in a field there with a hoe". She was made a Fellow in the Indian Weed Science Society for her efforts.

Dr. Bellinder also acted locally, bringing fresh, nutritious food to hungry families in New York's Southern Tier. She initiated Cornell's efforts to provide fresh fruits and vegetables from the Homer C. Thompson Research Farm to the Food Bank of the Southern Tier. She realized that rather than composting the farm's edible produce, they could feed hungry area families. Since 2004, as a result of her initiative, Cornell has donated close to 2 million pounds of produce from the Thompson farm.

Those who knew Dr. Bellinder would often describe her as soft-spoken but one whose words had tremendous impact. She will be remembered as an intense, thoughtful, loyal, generous, creative and loving person who tenaciously advocated for the things she believed were important. She will be greatly missed.

Dr. Bellinder is survived by her daughter, Jessica Bellinder, son-in-law, Brian Arthur, and granddaughter, Fiona Claire Bellinder, of New York; her brother, Tod Willis-Redfern, of Eaton Rapids, Mich. her half-sister, Susan Fujii, of Mountain View, Calif. and her nieces, Alexis Willis-Redfern and Keilani and Malia Fujii.

*Written by Steve Reiners, chair; Craig Cramer, and Toni DiTommaso; with assistance from
Jessica Bellinder*