Norman W. Simmonds

**Norman Willison Simmonds** (born 5 December 1922) was an influential and respected botanist and plant breeder better known in the banana community as the author of *Bananas*[^1], the standard monograph on the crop, and *The Evolution of the Bananas*[^2]. He was also a potato and sugar cane breeder. A prolific writer, he wrote more than 250 articles, in addition to his many books.

Right until his last weeks Simmonds actively participated in agricultural research, regularly interacting with researchers and responding to new developments through his frequent letters published in journals. One of his last letters was published in the December 2001 issue of *INFOMUSA*[^3].

Those who knew him describe him as an iconoclast, gifted scientist, profound thinker and stimulating teacher[^4]. He was also admired for “his capacity for sustained enthusiasm”[^5]. As a teacher and writer, he influenced a countless number of students and researchers. He died in Edinburgh, UK, on 4 January 2002, aged 79.

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**Early life and education**

Simmonds was born in Bedford, UK, where his father was a civil servant. He was introduced to botany while he was a student at Whitgift School in Croydon. From there, he won a scholarship to attend Cambridge University, where he studied under professors who encouraged his interest in plant breeding and genetics. He graduated from Cambridge with a First Class degree in the Natural Sciences after which he obtained a Colonial Agricultural Scholarship to study at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture (ICTA) in Trinidad. He obtained an MA from Cambridge in 1948 and a Sc.D (Doctor of Science) in 1966.

**Career**

Simmonds so impressed the ICTA staff, that he was invited to join them as a lecturer in botany in 1945[^6]. With Kenneth S. Dodds, he developed a banana breeding strategy consisting in crossing...
diploids with triploids to obtain tetraploids. By the time he left in 1959, he had become Senior Cytogeneticist in the Banana Research Section.

In 1959, Simmonds returned to the UK as head of the Potato Genetics Department at the John Innes Institute, where he rejoined Dodds, the then director. It was during this time that he developed the concept of broadening the genetic base of a crop. In 1965, he took up the position of Director of the Scottish Plant Breeding Station, then at Pentlandfield on the outskirts of Edinburgh. In 1976, he joined the staff of the Edinburgh School of Agriculture.

This return to academia allowed Simmonds to bring his vast experience to bear on new projects. Having long recognized the importance of exchanging experiences across crops, he undertook to edit and write six chapters for a book covering more than 100 crop plants and their wild ancestors, *Evolution of Crop Plants*. From 1978 to 1998, he served on the Editorial Board of *Experimental Agriculture* and as a Book Review Editor from 1978 to 1987.

After officially retiring in 1982, at the age of 60, he continued taking on consultancies on an ever-widening range of tropical crops. He travelled widely, as Chair of the Quinquennial Review of the International Board for Plant Genetic Resources and later on behalf of the FAO and the World Bank. He remained active academically, writing on a variety of topics, including fly fishing, one of his hobbies.

**Work on bananas**

The 15 years he spent at the ICTA after his graduation in the early 1940s laid the foundations for his career in tropical plant breeding in general, and bananas in particular. During this period he made two collecting trips: to East Africa in 1948 and the Asia-Pacific region in 1954-55. It is also during this time that he developed with Kenneth Shepherd a nomenclature system for classifying cultivated bananas.

In the early 1980s, Simmonds was a strong supporter of the concept of INIBAP, which he later criticized for deviating from its primary objective by promoting plant pathology and biotechnology instead of “old-fashioned plant breeding”. He made his disapproval of the investment in research on biotechnology well known. As he wrote in the March 2001 issue of the Tropical Agriculture Association Newsletter, “no one ever improved a crop by researching its diseases as a starting point, no matter what the bureaucrats and plant pathologists think”.

**Publications on bananas**

In his lifetime, Simmonds published 48 scientific papers on banana alone, covering many subjects from genetics to the development of fruit and germination of seeds. His books, *Bananas* and *The Evolution of the Bananas*, were respectively published in 1959 and 1962. *Bananas* was re-edited in 1966 and in 1987 (this time as co-author to R.H. Stover). His many publications on bananas are listed, along with the ones on other crops and topics, in a paper on his life and career published in Plant Breeding Reviews shortly before his death.

He was also a frequent contributor to the Tropical Agriculture Association Newsletter. In 1962, he wrote a popular paper on "Where bananas come from" for the New Scientist magazine in which he singled out wind as the greatest hazard to banana cultivation.
Recognition

In 1970, he was elected fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and in 1975, the University of Edinburgh made him an Honorary Professor. In 1991, he was the first non-American to receive the Distinguished Economic Botanist Award given by the American Society of Economic Botany.²

References

3. PDF of the last letter N.W. Simmonds sent to INFOMUSA.
9. Tropical Agriculture Association journal and newsletter
10. Where bananas come from in the 4 October 1962 issue of New Scientist (No. 307)

Also on this website

Remembering the world's most famous banana scientist in the 11 May 2012 issue of the ProMusa blog
Norman Simmonds' articles on bananas recorded in Musalit

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