

# Scientist gets World Food Prize for wheat advances

June 18 2014, by David Pitt

---

A crop scientist credited with developing hundreds of varieties of disease-resistant wheat adaptable to many climates and difficult growing conditions was named Wednesday as the 2014 recipient of the World Food Prize.

Sanjaya Rajaram, 71, wins the \$250,000 prize founded by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Norman Borlaug that honors vital contributions to improving the quality, quantity or availability of food throughout the world.

Rajaram, who was born in India and is a citizen of Mexico, began research and field work with Borlaug in 1969. He successfully crossed varieties of winter and spring wheat with his own plant breeding techniques, which led to the development of plants that have higher yields and dependability under a wide range of environments—important in keeping pace with the growing world population.

He is credited with developing 480 [wheat varieties](#) that have been released in 51 countries on six continents.

"It's a great honor," Rajaram said. "I'm a very humble person but very honored the World Food Prize committee has recognized me for the work I have done."

The next big challenge, Rajaram believes, is developing plants with more drought tolerance, staving off the effects of salt water intrusion as

oceans rise, and other issues related to climate change.

"Future crop production is bound to decline unless we fully factor in the issues related to climate change, soil fertility and water deficits, and utilize advanced genetics in the next 20 to 30 years," he said in a telephone interview.

Rajaram was born in a small village in the Uttar Pradesh state in northeast India, where people lived on very little. He expanded upon his mentor Borlaug's work with his own achievements, said World Food Prize Foundation President Kenneth Quinn.

"His breakthrough breeding technologies have had a far-reaching and significant impact in providing more food around the globe and alleviating world hunger," Quinn said in a statement.

Quinn said it's fitting that the prize be awarded to Rajaram as the Des Moines-based organization celebrates the centennial of Borlaug's 1914 birth in Cresco, Iowa. Borlaug, who won the 1970 Nobel for boosting agricultural production in what has become known as the Green Revolution, launched the World Food Prize in 1986. He died in 2009.

Borlaug once referred to Rajaram as "the greatest present-day wheat scientist in the world," Quinn said.

Rajaram succeeded Borlaug in leading wheat research at the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center, which was founded in 1966 through an agreement between the Rockefeller Foundation and the Mexican Secretariat of Agriculture.

Prior to Rajaram's research, winter wheat and spring [wheat](#) were distinct gene pools. Rajaram's new varieties can be grown in marginal areas, such as small mountain plots in Pakistan, remote areas in China, and in the

acidic soils of Brazil, the foundation said.

Rajaram said he plans to give some of the money from the prize to private organizations in India who work with the poor and use the remaining money for plant breeding research.

The announcement was made at a ceremony in Washington featuring Secretary of State John Kerry.

He said by inventing heartier crops and new species, Rajaram led an effort to save 1 billion lives. With projections that the global population will grow by 2 billion more people in the next three decades, "it's not hard to figure out this is the time for a second Green Revolution," Kerry said.

"Innovation and invention are the way forward and the way that we can face the challenges of food security and climate," Kerry said. "When it comes to [climate change](#), when it comes to food security, we are literally facing a moment of adversity perhaps even dire necessity."

Rajaram will receive the award at an Oct. 16 ceremony in Des Moines.

© 2014 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Scientist gets World Food Prize for wheat advances (2014, June 18) retrieved 8 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-06-scientist-world-food-prize-wheat.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.