

## Podcast: The untold story of Edith Rebecca Saunders—'mother of British plant genetics'

Edith Rebecca Saunders  
Edith Rebecca Saunders at  
work in her experimental  
garden at Cambridge  
University. Photo courtesy  
of Newnham College  
Cambridge

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, renowned geneticist [William Bateson](#) worked closely with [Edith Rebecca Saunders](#)—one of the first women to pursue a scientific education and research career at Cambridge University in an era when women were excluded from formal lectures and prevented from graduating.

Rather than a mere research assistant, which was the best that most scientifically minded women could hope for at the time, Saunders was an equal colleague with Bateson. She was a formidable teacher and researcher, eventually becoming director of the [Balfour Biological Laboratory for Women](#) in Cambridge, and made important contributions to genetics through her meticulous plant-breeding experiments. Saunders was also a key member of many scientific societies, and co-founded The Genetics Society together with Bateson in 1919.

But while Bateson tends to get the glory, particularly for his popularization of Gregor Mendel's ideas about heredity and his invention of the word 'genetics', much less is heard about Saunders, despite the eminent scientist JBS Haldane referring to her as the 'mother of British plant genetics'.

On this episode of Genetics Unzipped, geneticist Kat Arney explores the story of Edith Rebecca 'Becky' Saunders, and reflects on the changing opportunities for women in science today.

<https://geneticliteracyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/025-When-Becky-met-Bateson-Genetics-Unzipped.mp3>

[Full transcript, credits and show notes are available here.](#)

[Explore the story of Edith Rebecca Saunders in this series of posters prepared by Christine Alexander, former librarian at the Cambridge University Department of Genetics.](#)

**Genetics Unzipped** is presented by award-winning science communicator and biologist [Kat Arney](#) and produced by [First Create the Media](#) for the UK [Genetics Society](#). Follow Kat on Twitter [@Kat\\_Arney](#) and Genetics Unzipped [@geneticsunzip](#)

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