



**AWARD Fellow 2009**  
**Maryam Imbumi**

<b>Position:</b>	MSc student (Nutrition)
<b>Institution:</b>	Centre of Excellence for Nutrition, Faculty of Health Sciences North-West University, South Africa
<b>Country:</b>	Kenya
<b>BSc:</b>	Biology, University of Nairobi
<b>Mentored by:</b>	Dr. Retha van der Walt, Lecturer Morogo Research Programme North-West University

Scientist, nutritionist, mountain climber. Maryam Imbumi is undaunted by mountains—be they academic challenges or the actual slopes of Mount Kenya, which this ambitious biologist has scaled several times.

Imbumi's love of plants began as a child in rural Kenya. She often went with her mother into the forest to harvest indigenous plants. Traditionally, most Kenyans only eat these plants out of desperation in times of dire hunger. "My mom made them taste so delicious that I wondered why other people in our community didn't eat them, especially when there was so much malnutrition among the children."

Imbumi's grandmother was also very knowledgeable about the nutritional and medicinal use of plants. "Whenever my mother had a baby, my grandmother would tell me to prepare spider plant (*Cleome gynandra*), explaining that this vegetable would help my mother to produce milk for the new baby," recalled Imbumi.

Fascinated by the potential of indigenous plants, Imbumi decided to study biology. To pay her tuition, she worked throughout high school and university, including holding a job as an ethnobotanist with the National Museums of Kenya (2001-2008). In 2007, Imbumi graduated with a BSc in Biology from the University of Nairobi. In 2008, she won the Japan International Award for Young Agricultural Researchers from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in Japan. The US\$5,000 prize, which is administered by the Japan International Research Center for Agricultural Sciences, recognizes and rewards the contributions of young agricultural researchers to technological developments that improve food security and the environment in developing countries. Imbumi traveled to Tokyo with her father to accept the prestigious prize.

Imbumi worked with Bioversity International on African leafy vegetables from 2004-2008. Her work initially focused on providing evidence about the value of African leafy vegetables, and in particular the seed systems: how to obtain seeds from wild samples, bulk them up, cultivate them, and supply seeds to farmers. In addition, Imbumi developed protocols for the cultivation and use of African leafy vegetables in a series of 14 booklets, and took part in training sessions to help farmers make use of that information.

In 2008, Imbumi enrolled in an MSc program in nutrition at North-West University, South Africa. In 2009, she was selected from more than 500 applicants to receive one of 60 fellowships from African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD). AWARD is a professional development program that strengthens the research and leadership skills of African women in agricultural science, empowering them to contribute more effectively to poverty alleviation and food security in sub-Saharan Africa.

Imbumi says that her participation in AWARD has already helped to advance her research to assess growth in children who consume soybean as a weaning and complementary food. Through the AWARD network she gained a research placement with the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) Tropical Soil Biology and Fertility Institute. With AWARD's support, Imbumi recently attended the International Congress of Ethnobiology in Vancouver, Canada; she was the only Kenyan student to attend the forum.

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