

Dr. Jodie Sims Holt

It is with great sadness and deepest sympathy that we share the passing of Dr. Jodie Holt, friend, colleague, mentor, professor, faculty member and Chair of the Department of Botany and Plant Sciences at UC Riverside, Dean, and Director of the UCR Botanic Gardens, who passed away April 27, 2026.

Jodie was a highly respected scholar and mentor who contributed to botany, ecology, invasive species, plant physiology, and weed science for over 40 years. Her journey in botany began with a passion sparked in her first botany course, leading her to earn a BS in Botany from the University of Georgia in Athens, followed by MS and PhD degrees in Botany from UC Davis.

She was always a source of inspiration, an advocate of the natural world, able to connect scientific concepts to everyday life, and as one student wrote “She opened our eyes to the awesome world of plants”. Her research focused on integrating biological knowledge and ecological functions with vegetation management, particularly in weeds and invasive species in agricultural and wildland ecosystems of the southwestern United States. Using physiological and ecological approaches, she studied plant invasion mechanisms at the individual, population and community levels to inform management strategies. Jodie had superior communication and presentation skills. She could take a complex plant invasion topic and explain her research clearly, in a manner that everyone in her audience could understand the need for and significance of the work – all in 15 minutes! In all, Jodie authored nearly 100 academic papers and book chapters, and co-authored three editions of the influential reference book *Ecology of Weeds and Invasive Plants*.

To her many undergraduate and graduate students, Jodie was an exemplary academic, an irreplaceable mentor, and amazing role model, and a good friend who was always available for support and guidance. Her lab was a warm, welcoming and dynamic place that fostered rigorous research, concise, clear writing skills, skillful public outreach, and frequent hilarity. Jodie trained strong academic skills, but also fostered professional skills, cooperation, and productive collaborations within and across a broad network of plant experts and organizations. She created a wealth of opportunities for students by providing the flexibility and support required for students to pursue careers in every sector. Jodie's mentorship had far reaching impacts, as her many successful lab members continue to thrive as notable professionals in private, public, educational, non-profit and academic realms. Jodie's leadership at the University of California, Riverside, has equally lasting impacts. Jodie served as Chair of the Botany and Plant Sciences department through several challenging years from 2003-2010, and was Divisional Dean of Agricultural and Natural Resources from 2012 – 2015. Although Jodie retired from UCR in 2015, she went on to lead the UCR Botanic Gardens from 2016 on. In all

her roles, Jodie was valued for her professionalism, integrity, collegiality, and commitment to scientific excellence and the institution.

In addition to her scholarship, leadership and mentorship, Jodie was a scientific advisor for James Cameron's blockbuster film *Avatar*. Jodie's work on *Avatar* became one of the most unusual and memorable chapters of her career, bringing together science, storytelling, and popular culture in a way that perfectly reflected her personality and passions. Recruited during the film's development, she worked with actress Sigourney Weaver, director James Cameron, and the production team to help create scientifically credible plant life for the fictional moon Pandora. She advised filmmakers on how botanists study plants in the field, developed scientific descriptions and Latin names for fictional species, and helped shape the ecological logic behind Pandora's alien environment. Jodie approached the work not simply as entertainment, but as an opportunity to inspire curiosity about plants and science.

Her legacy lives in the students she inspired, the colleagues she mentored, the staff she empowered, and the countless people and friends she inspired to look more closely at the natural world and see plants differently. We extend our deepest condolences to Jodie Holt's family, friends, colleagues, and all who knew her.