

A Women in Crop Science Conversation with.....Sylvie Cloutier

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Background

As part of our expanding Women in Crop Science community (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6511355>) we are interested in finding out (and sharing!) more about female leaders in the global crop science community. To structure this we've initiated a new "Women in Crop Science Conversations" interview series to provide insight into the lives and work of women who inspire us. The interview format was developed by Julie Van Vlasselaer with inputs from Stéphanie Swarbreck, Laura Dixon and I. The first conversation was with Sylvie Cloutier from Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) and took place during the 4DWheat Women in Crop Science coffee morning in Montreal, Canada on 15th June, 2022. Sylvie's work is focused on the improvement of wheat and flax. She currently co-leads the 4DWheat: Diversity, Domestication, Discovery, and Delivery program (with Curtis Pozniak), a large Canada-wide program. Read more about Sylvie's research here: <https://profils-profiles.science.gc.ca/en/profile/sylvie-cloutier-phd>.

A Women in Crop Science Conversation

Briefly describe what you do?

I am a geneticist who is an early adopter – and on occasion a trailblazer – of new technologies but almost always with applied goals. To do that, I work with real plants and perform field trials and I work in collaboration with people who bring complementary expertise such as bioinformatics and plant pathology.



Why did you get into research, and crop science in particular?

I did my undergraduate degree in agronomy because the applied side of biological science appealed to me (and although I was interested in medicine, I can't stand the sight of blood or human suffering). I discovered research through summer jobs during my undergrad and realized that I had this inquisitive mind that would never be satisfied by a non-cerebral job. I believed that a career in crop science research could be fulfilling for someone like me, and I've not been disappointed.

Lab or field? Both! Don't make me choose between my two kids.

Conference or stakeholder meeting? Conference.

Literature review or project report? Project report.

Conventional or molecular methods? Both.

Hybrid, inbred or vegetative? Inbred.

Qualitative or quantitative research? Quantitative.

Genstat or R? Neither; maybe R

Favorite crop & why? Wheat because it feeds the world, but flax is fun.

What do you love most about your job?

The large scope of decision making.

Any major hurdles?

The administrative burden and the restrictions that come along with being a government scientist.

Who has influenced you most and why?

My parents are examples of uncontested work ethic. They instilled in me a sense of responsibility for my actions and decisions. As the seventh of eight children I was given the freedom to be myself and choose my path but knew also that the outcomes were my responsibility.

What is your favorite aspect of your research?

When cutting-edge technologies and so-called old-fashioned or conventional field phenotyping merge.

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

Retired! Spending time on the other things I love including hiking, cycling, playing golf and learning a language.

Beach or mountain? Mountain every single time.

Tea or coffee? Coffee always.

Appetizer or dessert? Dessert hands down.

Instagram or Twitter? What are they?

Fame or fortune? Neither – stay under the radar and get the job done. The pursuit of education and science is about knowledge, not about money.

Final word

Although I've known Sylvie for several years, I learnt a lot of things I didn't know about her during the interview (including that she is the seventh of eight children to parents who sound incredibly inspiring). Sylvie is refreshingly honest and open, and it seems has always carried the gift of knowing what her goals are and having the ability to work out how to achieve them. The most enlightening part of the interview was her response to the first question: rather than introducing herself via her job title or position she simply explained what she loves to do and why. I think this is a unique response that demonstrates her true belief in what she does, and in herself.