

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR WOMEN IN SCIENCE

Always on the move

Ludivine Thomas has a full day ahead of her. Between balancing her career as a scientist, focusing on an active family life, and indulging her passion for sports, Ludivine keeps a quick pace and finds fulfilment in a full and busy way of life.

The mother of two young girls is behind a seed company's efforts on seed health, finding new ways to prevent the spread of seed-borne diseases in a growing, fast-paced global business.

Hello, Ludivine. Tell us what you do.

I am the Seed Health Manager in the Quality Control department of HM.Clause. I am responsible for the lab involved with testing seed-borne diseases for all seeds lots for commercial purposes as well as for breeding lines and basic seeds. I manage a team of 14 permanent members involved in routine testing and projects.

What is your scientific background?

I hold a Bachelor with Honours in seed biotechnology and a PhD in plant biology. For my PhD, I studied the enzymes responsible for the accumulation of sulfur in onion. After my studies, I did two post-docs in Proteomics to study aspects of fruit development and stress signaling, notably in response to pathogen attacks.

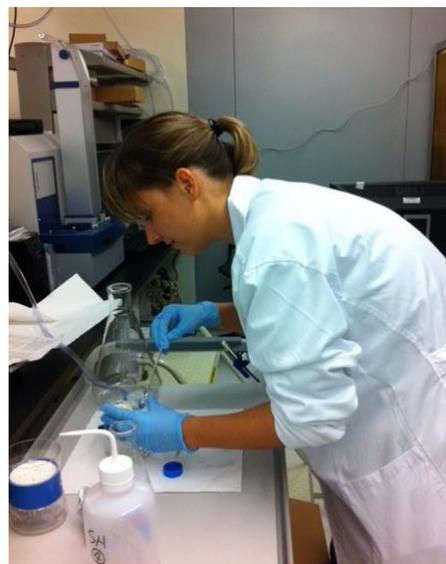
How did you become interested in plant science? How did you choose your field of specialization?

One of my happiest memories as a child was the time I spent gardening with my grandfather. He taught me how to nurture plants and this transformed into a lifelong passion for me. I have always been curious about how plants develop, evolve and grow, with a desire to help develop better plants and fruits for consumption and sustainability.

Which topic are you working on at the moment? How do you think you'll make a difference?

At the moment, I am working on the detection of Pospiviroids and Tobamo in Solanaceae. There are also a few other protocols that we try to optimize in my lab for increased quality and efficiency. These projects are important for hastening the pace at which we can detect pathogen, but most of all the reliability and sensitivity of detection methods – find out whether the quality of our methods allows for the determination of the status of a seed lot.

What is a typical day like for you?



Ludivine at work in the lab

A typical day starts rather early before my kids wake up, and I go for a run and do some yoga. This helps me balance myself and sets me off with a positive attitude for the entire day. Whatever happens, I know that I will have reached some personal milestones! After taking care of my two daughters and dropping them off at school, I start my workday by reaching out to my team. I always try to take some time to greet every member of my team and see how their day is starting. After that I either try to catch up with emails or go to meetings. A quite big part of my work is done in meetings, either in one-to-one sessions with my project technicians or with my team managers, or with internal collaborators (supply chain planners, research team, QC managers...). I tend to have a late and quick homemade lunch so that I can finish early.



Ludivine enjoying a bike ride with her daughters

Generally, in the afternoons, whenever I can, I block myself sessions to work on reports, data analysis or designing experiments. However, I often have meetings also in the afternoon. I try to finish rather early whenever I can so I can pick up my kids from school and spend time with them. If needed, I do a bit more work in the evening once they are sleeping. It is the way I found myself and my family balanced – not perfect, but it does work for me so far.

What are the hardest parts related to this work?

The speed definitely. Business is always on the move, especially since HM.Clause is an international company and based in several locations (US, France and Asia). Seed health diseases are becoming more numerous and we always have to optimize methods or even design new ones. As such, I have to work in a fast pace to stay on track otherwise it is easy to feel overwhelmed and lose confidence.

Besides your scientific interests, what are your personal interests?

During my PhD studies, I found out that sports helped me a lot to keep stress levels down. So, I started training and participating in triathlons. As a mother, I cannot anymore train for all 3 activities (running, biking and swimming) but I still run 5 times a week and practice swimming once a week. I also try to involve my kids in my practice, so they also discover the benefits of sports. When I have time, I also love to do crafts such as painting on glass and making jewelry. I love to play board games with my family.

Did you have a role model that influenced your decision to work in science?

I actually have not had the chance to have a woman scientist as a role model that helped nor influenced me during my studies or early career. I however had the chance to come across several very good male scientists who mentored me, especially during my Honours studies.

In your opinion, which changes, if any, are needed in the scientific system to be more attractive to women in science and possible future scientists?

In my opinion, the scientific system needs to adapt better to the desire of women to become mothers. Throughout my career, I have met numerous women who either give up on their desire to start a family or postpone having kids until later in life, such as the early 40s. Generally, life as a scientist is not adapted to women who want to raise children especially when working in universities. At least in my own experience this was the case. I stopped working in universities to have a better work-life balance. One aspect that could be improved is giving the opportunity for women to take time off or work part time without being discriminated for tenure-track, permanent jobs or even promotion. ■

by Francine Sayoc for the International Seed Federation