

URL: <https://stvp.stanford.edu/blog/videos/the-founding-of-agraquest>

Pam Marrone, founder and former Chairman/CEO of AgraQuest Inc., talks about how she turned her childhood passion and love for bugs into a lifelong commitment that led her to found AgraQuest.



Transcript

My major goal since I was about eight, so I'm a little bit weird.. I was interested in bugs since I was young and studied entomology my entire career.. Entomology being the study of insects.. And I grew up in a family that was organic gardeners, 40 acres in Connecticut, very green family.. My father was an energy efficiency expert and my mother is a master gardener who does everything organic and so I decided I wanted to have a career pursuing developing products that were going to be safer than chemical pesticides.. And I started my career from graduate school, getting a PhD in entomology and then went to, right of graduate school to Monsanto company and a very exciting program.. I was allowed to start up to look for new solutions for insect control and I was pretty much given a blank sheet of paper and said just find something new.. And had a really good time there for seven years.. But Monsanto ultimately decided they wanted to pursue genetically engineered plants.. Engineering the insect controlled proteins in the genes that called for those proteins into plants, which have become very successful and my group switched to that and was very involved in doing that but I actually was more interested in looking for things that you could spread, microbes like bacteria and fungi that you can actually spray on plant to kill insects and plant diseases and so forth rather than the engineering rout..

So I got a call from a Danish company called Novo Nordisk and they said, well we'd like you to start up a company somewhere in the US and we ultimately decided on Davis, California to start it up and so I was given the money to start up a company as a wholly owned subsidiary looking for novel solutions for insect control that were based on naturally occurring microorganisms that could be fermented like you're making wine and beer in the tank.. And the reason they wanted to this is because they had excess tank capacity at that time.. Wanted to fill those tanks and hire a big consulting firm who said diversify.. And so they wanted to get into all these new businesses, of which we were one and so we started off a program looking for naturally occurring microorganisms that you could ferment that you could spray out as pesticides.. And after five years, they were having some real problems in their core businesses and that they actually, they didn't anticipate that they were going to have a tank shortage after five years.. And so they couldn't, didn't have enough tanks to meet their main core businesses of industrial enzymes, so they hired, I think it was Booz Allen at that time.. And Booz Allen said, well you've diversified too much please sell all your ancillary businesses and get back to your core.. So we were sold in '95 and I took three scientists who are still at AgraQuest as the founding scientific team and then started up, raised about \$500,000 from friends and family and some large farmers and we were on our way...