

The Adventures of Meg A. Mole, Future Chemist



**Dr. Victoria Finkenstadt,
Lead Scientist, U.S. Department
of Agriculture (USDA)**



For Earth Day 2017, I traveled all the way to Peoria, Illinois to meet Dr. Victoria Finkenstadt. Dr. Finkenstadt is a Lead Scientist who directs research for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) at their National Center for Agricultural Utilization Research. “We fondly call it the Ag Lab,” she says with a laugh. That was a much easier name for me to remember!

So what does the team at the USDA Ag Lab do? Dr. Finkenstadt explained, “We use natural materials, grown in the United States, to make new plastic materials.” Her work includes research using plant-based polymers. I learned how this research is very important and needed for our environment. She continued, “With unstable petroleum prices, people are looking for alternatives that cost less but are also sustainable and friendly to the environment.”

I asked Dr. Finkenstadt, “What do you like most about your job?” She shared with me that she “loves learning new things, doing research with a purpose, and having independence for planning and executing programs.”

The day-to-day work in the Ag Lab has a lot of variety. Working in the laboratory only takes up about 15% of Dr. Finkenstadt’s schedule. In the lab, they work with “engineering equipment for plastics materials” ... and always remember to wear their safety glasses! The majority of her time (about 60%) is dedicated to planning and analysis/interpretation of data. She also spends some time writing for publications and managing her team.

So why did Dr. Finkenstadt go into science? While growing up, her family “played a lot of counting games and thinking games.” She came from a large family and remembers clearly that they “were always playing some sort of educational game devised by her parents.” However, after having a very good freshman chemistry teacher who always used demonstrations in class, she knew she wanted to be a chemist.

As I was getting ready to leave, I asked Dr. Finkenstadt one more question. “Where would a child come in contact with the work that you have done here in the Ag Lab?” She was very excited to share that she had worked for a few years on the take-home containers that we get from restaurants! So the next time you are at a restaurant and get your order “to go,” think about all of the science that Dr. Finkenstadt and her team did to create that box just for you!



Personal Profile

FAVORITE PASTIME/HOBBY? Gardening and planting

ACCOMPLISHMENT YOU ARE PROUD OF?

Getting her doctorate

VERY INTERESTING PROJECT YOU WERE A

PART OF? Current bio-based anticorrosive project

BIRTHDAY? March 23