

Interview: Mary-Dell Chilton on her pioneering work on GMO crops

Mary-Dell Chilton pioneered the field of genetic engineering in agriculture.

She has spent most of her decades-long career working for [Syngenta](#), where she founded the agribusiness company's research on genetically modified seeds.

But Chilton started out in academia. And it was here in St. Louis, at Washington University, that she led the team that created the first genetically-modified plants in the early 1980s.

Her work would transform agriculture — and trigger a heated debate over the safety of GMOs.

At 76 years old, Chilton is still working. The genetically-modified corn, soybeans and other crops that her research helped develop now grow on more than 170 million acres of U.S. farmland. Earlier this month, Chilton's groundbreaking discoveries earned her a place in the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

To produce the first genetically-engineered plants, Chilton used nature as a role-model: specifically, a type of bacteria — *Agrobacterium tumefaciens* — that can insert its genes into plants.

Chilton: "When I moved to Washington University, my mission became to imitate what *Agrobacterium* had done — put genes of our choice into plant cells. And then, hopefully, to be able to make complete plants that carried the gene in their seeds and in their progeny."

Chilton had no idea genetic engineering would transform agriculture in the way that it has.

Chilton: "In fact, when I joined industry, even the company had little idea. They knew that it would make products, but they thought that it would creep into the market little by little by little. They had no idea that it would take the market by storm, as in fact it did."

The GLP aggregated and excerpted this blog/article to reflect the diversity of news, opinion and analysis. Read full, original post: [St. Louis is birthplace of GMOs; meet the woman who created them](#)