

In good company

Our favorite female scientists

We asked researchers at the UC Davis Environmental Health Sciences Center to name their favorite female scientist. This is what they said.



Fae Donat Wood, Zoologist

LAURA VAN WINKLE: One of my favorite female scientists is the first one I met: My maternal grandmother. She developed an animal model of rheumatoid arthritis and worked at UCLA. She also was a lifelong learner. She traveled throughout North and South America with my grandfather—both were naturalists interested in insect hosts of Chagas disease, animals and plants. Having scientist grandparents who were into understanding the natural world is what led me to my work in environmental toxicology. My grandmother always encouraged my interest in science and said when I was considering graduate school that her experience was one of the most exciting times of her life. Of course she also had a number of cautionary stories about barriers for women scientists—like the story about how a certain East Coast university would not let her take chemistry labs because it would be distracting to the male students, so she transferred to Berkeley. Even after she retired, she had scientific curiosity and would test different ways of growing plants to yield the best outcome for flowers or fruit. I remember going to her house when she was in her 70s to find her in the back yard standing on a chair measuring a sunflower because she had been testing a different pattern of watering and using fertilizers.



Theo Colborn, Zoologist

PAM LEIN: She had an amazing ability to connect seemingly unrelated observations and a knack for communicating science to lay audiences. She gave birth to the field of endocrine disruption. I had the chance to talk to her in person on several occasions—she was warm, funny and irreverent about many things.



Monica McLemore, Nurse Researcher

TANYA KHEMET TAIWO: Dr. McLemore's research focuses on understanding factors that influence the health, well-being and livelihood of low-income people and women of color. She uses the Reproductive Justice (RJ) framework to design rigorous studies addressing novel and complex research questions.



Jane Goodall, Primatologist

PAM LEIN: She's a favorite for her incredible pioneering scientific discoveries and bravery championing protection of chimpanzees in the wild, and her ability to convert inspiration into action. Plus she gave us really meaningful quotes!



Pamela Lein, Neurotoxicologist

ANTHONY WEXLER, NICHOLAS KENYON & SASCHA NICKLISCH: She is doing important work on the brain and how environmental toxicants can lead to neurological problems. She is successful yet pleasant, humble and respectful. She helps support young faculty in their academic careers without putting herself in the limelight.



Saraswathi Vedam, Midwife

TANYA KHEMET TAIWO: She has set national and international policy on place of birth and midwifery education and regulation. She has provided expert consultations to policy makers around the world and chaired four national Home Birth Consensus summits.



Cristina Davis, Biomedical Engineer

NICHOLAS KENYON: I admire how she runs a large, complex research program that is 100% effort, maintains an administrative leadership role as department chair, but still has the time to engage with others to build relationships and teams to further novel research.



Marie Curie, Physicist & Chemist

CHRISTOPH VOGEL: She is my favorite for her courage, determination, perseverance and all that at a time when it was very difficult for women to succeed in science.



Savannah Mack D'Evelyn, Physiologist

KENT PINKERTON: She has an amazing ability to organize a research study, involve students and staff and reach out to the community where the research is being conducted.



Jedidah Isler, Astrophysicist

CLARE CANNON: She is the first African-American woman to complete her PhD in Astrophysics from Yale (2014). Her ability to communicate complex concepts in astrophysics to the public in a way that we can understand makes her my favorite scientist. This in her barrier-shattering career is an inspiration to all of us. Don't just take my word for it, check out her Ted Talk on "The untapped genius that could change science for the better" or her National Geographic video on "Black holes, blazars, and women of color in science."



Barbara McClintock, Cytogeneticist

LAURA VAN WINKLE: She studied genetic transposition and regulation in maize. Her work was very important and eventually she won the Nobel Prize, but initially it wasn't completely clear how her discoveries and research would lead to advances in understanding genetic control. She is a true example of a pioneering woman scientist doing basic research.

HONG JI: She was the first woman to receive an unshared Nobel Prize in Medicine or Physiology. I admire her dedication to research and desire for scientific freedom.



Annie Jump Cannon, Astronomer

RANDY CARNEY: As a deaf woman, she overcame enormous obstacles to make major scientific discoveries. She manually catalogued about 350,000 stars on small photographic plates, binning them into categories by trends she observed in their appearance. Later, she realized she was actually measuring their temperature. Her stellar classification system is still used today, 100 years later. It's a pure example of rigorous observational science that led to a new understanding of the world (and universe) around us, which truly inspires me!



Jane Sellen, Citizen Scientist

JONATHAN LONDON: She is the Co-Director of Californians for Pesticide Reform. She is my favorite scientist because she has helped make community-based environmental health research possible by connecting the research to the community. She helps channel community values and voice to make sure they are the center of research projects and the work benefits the community in meaningful ways. She also contributes key local knowledge to help design research methods as well as to ensure that the results are disseminated and applied in a way that will create a practical impact.