

[Live&learn]

A failed experiment, a rejected article: these things are soon labelled failures in academia. As for talking about it – not the done thing! But that is just what WUR scientists do in this column. Because failure has its uses. This time we hear from Mireille van Damme, a postdoctoral researcher in Plant Breeding. Text and illustration Stijn Schreven

'I submitted my first application for a Veni grant in 2011. I wanted to do research on using small RNAs to make plants resistant to fungal infections. When I defended my proposal in Utrecht, one committee member kept asking the same question – and whatever answer I gave, it was obviously not what he wanted to hear. I didn't get the grant. But I didn't actually see it as too disastrous, because I knew I could try again. What could I improve on before then? My proposal was good, and I had made it through all the preliminary rounds. I was heavily pregnant, so maybe that worked against me. People look at you differently, you stand differently. So I took a course on presentation skills with a theatre maker, who taught me that how you tell something is much more important than what you tell. I tried again two years later. I was more confident, I wasn't pregnant, and there was a different jury. I had practised with some of my colleagues beforehand, but they had been so critical that I

felt like giving up. On the morning of the interview, I lay on the floor in despair. I couldn't do anything. I decided to go for a walk in Utrecht. On the bus to Utrecht, I realized I looked awful, so instead of walking, I went shopping in the Hoog Catharijne mall.

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Once the interview started, I was in complete control. As I answered one question, I already knew what the next question would be. I had the grant in the bag. I don't see it as a failure that I didn't get that first Veni grant, but as a lesson: it all depends on a combination of circumstances – who you are facing and how you feel that day. The only thing you can do is to give yourself a second chance. I was quite literally floored, but you can pick yourself up.'

