

‘FOR ME, WAGENINGEN IS AN AMAZING OPTION’

With the arrival of Ronald Pierik, the Molecular Biology chair group has a new chair holder. After 20 years at Utrecht, Pierik is exchanging Utrecht University for Wageningen. *Resource* spoke with him on his first day at work.

You grew up in Heelsum yet chose to study biology in Nijmegen. Why not Wageningen?

‘Like many young people I didn’t really know what I wanted to study. I enrolled in a chemistry course, but eventually chose biology. I didn’t choose Wageningen because I wanted to go more into the medical molecular side. Secretly it was also because Wageningen was so close: I wanted to expand my horizons. I also did my PhD in Nijmegen.’

What was your PhD thesis about?

‘About the competition between plants and how they sense each other. I continued on that track as a postdoc in Utrecht. I was able to slowly build my own Photobiology group and I became chair holder of Plant Environment Signalling.’

And now Wageningen?

‘I should make it clear I was perfectly happy in Utrecht. But this job vacancy made me think. Do I want to be working in Utrecht for another 20 years? The occasional change is good, but you also don’t want to end up in a lesser place. For me, Wageningen is an amazing option. What you have here in terms of plant biology is unique in the Netherlands.’

A new photosynthesis institute is being set up. Did that affect your choice?

‘Photobiology is not the same as photosynthesis. Photobiology is about how light is perceived by plants and used by them to adapt to the environment. But photobiology does have lots of common ground with photosynthesis. I hope to develop that common ground. It’s strange,



Leaves of two *Arabidopsis thaliana* plants sense each other via light and surface touch. Each plant raises its leaves to avoid being overshadowed by the other plant • Photo Ronald Pierik

of course, that you have two different research fields for plants, both of which are about light, but they barely work together. I would like to bridge that gap. That’s why I’ve been working for a while

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with researchers from WUR, VU University Amsterdam and Michigan State University in the Dutch Research Council photosynthesis consortium.’

Will photobiology become a new branch in Molecular Biology?

‘That’s right. Some people from my Utrecht group are coming with me temporarily plus staff member Andrés Romanowski, who studies circadian (day-night, ed.) rhythms in plants and how the rhythms adapt to the light. The research in the chair group is very diverse, from nitrogen fixation to plant-fungi collaboration and from embryo development to the relationship between harvest yields and the branching of

grains. The main connecting theme is interest in the molecular networks that drive plant development, with an emphasis on interactions with the environment.’

Will new courses be added?

‘I can’t say anything about that on my first day, but I hope to add material about photobiology, for example. A lot of changes are being made to the content of various degree programmes, so this could be the right moment.’ RK

