Dr. Priscila Chaverri, Assistant Professor in the Department of Plant Sciences at the University of Maryland, has received a $650,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to fund her work on South American Leaf Blight (SALB), an organism the United Nations has classified as a “potential biological weapon of mass destruction.” Chaverri’s job is to discover, catalogue, identify, and scientifically name fungi. Over the past few years, Chaverri and her graduate assistant have worked on analyzing and controlling SALB, a fungal disease that has infected rubber trees in the Amazon Basin and has potentially devastating consequences for the trees and the economy. According to Chaverri, if this disease spreads to Asian or African rubber plantations, it will affect millions of workers. In partnership with the Smithsonian Institution and a laboratory in France, Chaverri’s lab is investigating a specific fungus that will be useful as a biocontrol agent in combating SALB. Because typical fungicides and pesticides have been ineffective against SALB, she hopes that the biocontrol agent will change and “coevolve” with the disease and still be effective over time. Chaverri encourages students to pursue research opportunities and get involved in research projects. When she was a student, Chaverri said she volunteered for many different projects because she wanted to gain experience and to build a competitive application for graduate school. She said that if a student came to her with a resume that listed a lot of research experience, she would choose that student over another student with a higher GPA and no experience. Having research experience, Chaverri believes, shows passion. As Chaverri said, “If an undergraduate student wanted to volunteer and come out to the field with me, they’d be welcome to come along.” However, she noted, “It’s tough to get people interested in mycology [the study of fungi] unless some sexy project comes along.” For students who are interested in fungi or fungal diseases, the SALB project may indeed be a sexy project.