

PLANTS ARE OF NO CONSEQUENCE or Why Plants Matter

Like the rest of the animal kingdom, human beings depend upon the plant world for their survival, let alone the maintenance of their current lifestyles.

With hindsight it is obvious to most people today that both the hunter-gatherers and the hunter-gatherer-fishers relied on plants and animals for food, medicine, fuel, shelter and clothing. Their settlement, initially in small groups, is believed to have begun at least 8000 years ago (the Middle Stone Age) independently in various parts of the world. This is witnessed in archaeological discoveries for instance in western Europe, eg. Robenhausen in Switzerland, and in the Spokane region of Washington DC in the North American United States. While possibly 2000 years earlier still, in eastern Asia, evidence has been found suggesting that rice could have been planted in paddyfields in that region, with small settlements nearby. In other words the birth of agriculture worldwide (the cultivation of plants previously harvested in the wild) would appear to have begun about 8-10,000 years ago.

The need to harvest, reserve and recognize stored seeds for the following year's crop would have contributed significantly to the development of managerial practices, a larger harvest than needed for the group of people in question would have encouraged bartering and exchange between groups (not only of the crop itself but the seeds as well – and artefacts) and the need for tools to cultivate, protect and maintain plants would have led to inventions for which plant material from ever-increasing sources in the wild would have been sought and experimented with. During their earlier nomadic life human beings' gradual dependence on plants ever increased. The move to static communities only served to accelerate that dependence and extend it into virtually every aspect of human civilisation – a process which still continues today. From the outset information on all aspects of plant involvement in human affairs was passed down through the generations from parent to child, certainly in the West until relatively recently. About 10-15 years ago some authorities noted that at the end of the 20th Century over 60% of parents in the Western World no longer told their children anything about plants at all. This state of affairs is exacerbated by a view among some authorities in the gardening world in Britain today that 30-45 year olds appear to show a marked lack of interest in gardening. Educationally too, in recent years, the media and various authorities have noted that at secondary and higher levels not only have a significant number of educational bodies dropped botany and horticulture from their curriculum but also that a tendency seems to be emerging at those levels (especially secondary) for any botany to be merged under biology as in centuries past. (This significant reduction in teaching botany flies in the face of growing primary level attempts to interest young children in botanical matters, gardening and the wider usage of plants.)

Additionally an expanding wealth of anecdotal evidence from the last couple of decades (and still added to today) illustrates amazing ignorance and indifference about anything relating to the countryside in the populace as a whole. These anecdotes involve a majority of people from all walks of life, most generations – and even rural dwellers. Examples of such anecdotes below range from a newspaper article about 10-15 years ago to a disturbing farming illustration (granted, not plant based) from the Summer of 2007.

- The article, which appeared in an English West Country regional newspaper, drew attention to a young boy of about nine (living in a County town surrounded by farmed countryside) who was surprised to find mud on a potato.
- Then there is the French author living in New York, Mireille Guiliano, who had a book published in 2006, *French Women for All Seasons*, in which she encourages the adoption of a healthy diet. In her introductory chapters she describes how in 2005 she met an eight year old boy attending the Union Square Greenmarket in New York. He was unable to recognise an apple, let alone a variety of one.
- A BBC radio reporter in July 2007 mentioned the response of young children when asked where carrots came from. She noted that less than 10% volunteered ‘the earth or the ground’ and that the rest believed carrots came from ‘the supermarket’.

I heard the last anecdotal example directly from an unimpeachable participant.

- In the Summer of 2007 a nutritionist/senior executive of a major supermarket chain was watching kindergarten children accompanied by their headmistress on a farm visit. In the milking parlour the headmistress informed the executive of her delight that these children could watch how cows are milked. She then sought personal advice from that executive with words to the effect ‘which cow provides the skimmed milk, which the semi-skimmed milk and which the pasteurized milk’.

If you need to be convinced further

- in July 2008 personnel from the National Trust were being interviewed on a BBC radio news programme about a new National Trust initiative about to be introduced. It aimed to address the Trust’s observation that a significant number of children are unable to identify the most common flora and fauna;
and from personal experience
- the word ‘plant’ has little resonance among a major part of the general public from all walks of life in this shallow celebrity-driven society. It can attract an oft-repeated reaction of, in the modern idiom, ‘I don’t do plants’.

I believe that the following factors (which are not exclusive) contribute to this situation:-

I. Knowledge

As centuries and millennia pass, the amount of information expands and the need to impart knowledge to more and more human beings becomes increasingly demanding. In order to manage that information it has been broken into disciplines. Then as the volume of a specific discipline’s information enlarges and its complexity increases so that discipline is further divided – thus enabling knowledge of that subject to be accessible, assimilated progressively and extended yet further.

Western World academics in earlier centuries studied plant structure and properties under ‘biology’ but, with time, this was segmented as a distinct scientific subject ‘botany’. Academically in theory and actuality ‘botany’ includes every aspect of the plant world. BUT at less academic levels and among layman the subject of ‘botany’ focuses primarily on both the structure and the physical and chemical properties of plants – as biology does of human beings – and information on the usage of plants and their modern and historical involvement in human activities would be more likely to be sought under, for example, geography or economics.

Discipline terminology, although necessary, has only exacerbated further the general public's separation from and indifference to plants. It has also encouraged today's culture, in the non-academic environment, of 'boxing' and emphasising the plant world under a few dominant and confined headings – primarily gardening, botany, cooking and medicine. Although these aspects are important in themselves they are the tip of a massive iceberg and their continued high profile tends to imply by default the extent of the human relationship with the plant world.

Plants are fundamental to virtually every aspect of human existence and therefore impinge on and are found in the overwhelming majority of disciplines (See below Summary of the General Index for *Plant Biographies* used on the CD).

II Urbanisation

There are several relevant side effects of the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th and early 19th Centuries in the Western World (particularly in Europe) :-

- an accelerating movement of large numbers of people from the countryside to urban areas not least as industrial and commercial work beckoned;
- progressively easier access to and reliance upon merchandise (the majority of which depends upon the plant world in some way) instead of personal involvement in harvesting ingredients (wild or cultivated) and inventing and making/preparing products;
- the gradual emergence in those urban areas, with the passage of time, of an ever more plant-free environment;
- advancing urban sprawl – which distances/divorces people who live and work geographically in the concrete urban centre.

III. Publications

Today's plethora of journals, magazines, books and other published material invariably address a specific audience, eg. academia, experts, general public, specific disciplines, entertainment, news, etc. Thus the material all of us read in our professional sphere, eg. carpenter, politician, scientist, inventor, historian, etc., may be completely different from that in our private capacity – and we do not always relate the two. Where the botanical world is concerned, this means that most botanical books written for academia are not readily available in general bookshops even when they may have a large proportion of information of general interest.

IV Media and Publishers

'Boxing' plants primarily under the headings gardening, botany, cooking and medicine is perpetuated by the media and general publishers. A recent personal experience well illustrates such practices. Despite all my efforts I was unable to overcome editorial 'house rules' after an interview with a respected local journalist who appeared to be fascinated by the *Plant Biographies* project. Her subsequent article was not printed under a general heading at the front of her thick weekly regional paper where it would have been likely to have reached a wider audience. Instead it appeared in the body of the issue at the beginning of the gardening section.

The extreme rarity of film or television programmes exploring the extensive, fascinating and entertaining history and usage of plants, up to and including modern times, contrasts dramatically with those made about the animal world, or plants under the ubiquitous ‘boxed’ headings. One can only wonder whether the programme makers themselves have unwisely succumbed

- to ‘boxing’ sirens ie. gardening, botany, cooking and medicine;
- to fears that the relatively inanimate nature of plants when compared with animals could be boring for the majority of audiences, and
- to a belief among some people that humans can relate to animals more easily than the relatively static and silent plant world.

As members of the general public most of us accept unquestioningly such media constraints and, in so doing, that unawareness and indifference to the vital and extensive part plants play in virtually every aspect of human life (and in the life of the planet) is exacerbated yet further.

V Language

Gardeners tend to refer to ‘garden plants, trees, bulbs, flowers, etc.’ not to ‘plants’ : cooks talk about ‘vegetables, fruit and herbs’ : and medicines are made with ‘herbs’. This approach can spill over into our professional lives too as, for instance, farmers are likely to talk about ‘crops, animal feed, wheat, etc.’ with little appreciation (or even awareness in many cases) of the many end-uses for which plants on their farm could be destined beyond the income their harvest will produce.

In the middle of the first decade of the 21st Century international authorities declared that over 50% of the World now resides in urban areas. Thus the points made above could well apply to all regions of the world in the near future if they do not do so already – not just the Western World.

It could be argued as well that in addition to climatic changes, general human indifference to the plant world could add a further negative dimension to the already uncertain future for many plants. As it is, botanists and environmentalists predict the loss of a large number of plant species in the immediate decades, including many of the relatively few familiar to man. This will leave a multitude of unknown species that will require time-consuming professional examination and investigation by specialists from many disciplines before these unfamiliar plants can be adopted as ‘alternative’ sources of materials and other valuable assets (including food and medicine).

Three further unrelated points:-

A For many years the phrase ‘you are what you eat’ has been bandied about and today more and more people are beginning to appreciate its meaning. If the relatively recent British Jamie Oliver television programme on the content of school meals did nothing else, it illustrated dramatically the high immediate positive effect on children’s brains when fresh food is substituted for junk food.

B. Less easily-defined but nevertheless valid is a lack of appreciation by most of the working populace (both employee and employer) of the plant world’s significant past and current contribution to civilisations. This can/could be a severe handicap in fulfilling the urgings of

authorities to consider and implement environmentally-friendly working practices as the potential for plant participation in such practices could be overlooked. And, of course, this principle applies equally to persuading members of the general public to react similarly in their private lives.

C. There is a concern among some authorities that reduced opportunities to pursue botany and horticulture at secondary and higher educational levels could lead to a future shortage of botanists, horticulturists and professional gardeners at a time when they will be in even greater demand by other disciplines. Today a few bodies (commercial and industrial) are actually beginning to seek advice from 'botanical' experts on how plants could be involved in resolving environmental and other issues. It would be disappointing if a future insufficiency of these plant professionals undermined this burgeoning recognition of their knowledge and experience. The birth of an expert on a particular subject begins in childhood. It is not only nurtured to a large extent by the enthusiasm for and appreciation of plants by families and friends but also their recognition of the need for botanical education to be available for their children.

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If the foregoing arguments are credible the need to entertain and inform/educate the general public on a large and concerted scale, and to encourage dialogue between all generations, grows ever more important. Environmentalists, botanists, politicians and other authorities all press humanity to improve their stewardship of the planet – an empty plea if nothing is done to reverse so much indifference in society as a whole towards plants.

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Summary of the General Index
extracted from *Plant Biographies*

Adornment, Anecdotes, Animal/bird, etc., Archaeological finds, Art, Basketry, Bodies, Charcoal, Chemicals, Cleaning, Clothing, Construction, Cosmetics, Cultivation, Currency/barter, Dental/oral uses, Divination, Dogma, Drink, Dyeing/staining, Emblem, Engines, Environmental issues, Equipment, Events
Famous objects/substances, Feed (amphibian), Feed (animal), Feed (bird), Feed (crustacean), Feed (fish), Feed (insect), Feed (mollusc), Feed (reptile), Feed (rodent), Festivals/rituals, Fictitious/mythological figures, Fireworks, Flooring, Flowers, Food, Food chain, Fuel, Furniture, Games/sports, Genetics, Glass, Groups of like people, Gum
Hairdressing, Hedging/fencing, Household items, Hunting/fishing, Ink, Legend, Lighting, Literature, Longevity, Matches, Material, Measurement, Medical/surgical issues, Military associations, Mining/oil drilling, Mourning, Music, Musical instruments, Needlework, Paints/varnishes, Paper, Perfume, Pesticide, Pharmaceuticals, Place/object/other names, Places, Plant, Plastics, Pollination, Product names, Repellent, Rope, Rosaries, Rubber
Sayings, Settlers, Sex, Slavery, Smoking, Soap, Society, Stoppers, Storage, Stuffing, Superstition, Symbolism, Tanning, Taxidermy, Toiletries, Tourism, Traders, Transport, Treaties/Projects/Schemes, Veterinary medicine, Walking sticks/umbrellas, etc., Waterfaring, Weapons, Weddings

* as well as nations/peoples, individuals, religions

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