

## PLANTS IN OUR LIVES

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We are surrounded by plants: they are the very basis of our life, providing, ultimately, all our food. They protect the land, supply us with many of our building needs, and could again become important as fuel. Above all they are renewable.

But for the moment and apart from all this, let us consider how plants enrich our lives—how they give pleasure and stimulate our senses. I doubt that there is any intrinsic reason why plants or vegetation (or animals, or other natural objects for that matter) should give us pleasure; in fact not a few incur our displeasure. That we do appreciate plants in general is part of our cultural heritage, something that we acquire during life. Of course, each one of us will have his or her special likes and dislikes, and moreover these will change with time. In what follows I will be considering plants from a subjective point of view, as part of our everyday life, and not as objects of scientific study, important though such study is in satisfying our curiosity, and for understanding and managing the world around us.

First and foremost for many of us is the pleasure that derives from a landscape, whether natural or cultural, that has a striking and orderly pattern of vegetation, one that is not monotonous or chaotic. Diversity and contrast seem to have become tremendously important in our lives. From the land and its vegetation we come now to the individual wild plant: the infinite range of form, colour, texture and smell is a never-ending source of wonder—even the sound of plants, in the wind, is there to be experienced. To see a plant in its natural habitat for the first time is a special pleasure, and to learn to recognise the different kinds is intellectually satisfying.

After the plant in the wild consider next the plant in cultivation. To grow plants successfully and to assemble them in that artificial community we call “the garden” can be a demanding occupation requiring skill and foresight; it gives immense satisfaction to many people, not only for the results achieved but as a relaxing activity.

In the garden, through hybridisation and selection, plants begin to be transformed, but they are still *real* plants. But now let us turn from the real plant to the *transfigured plant*—transfigured by the botanical artist, by the photographer, by the writer, by the poet, by the humorist, and by others whose work I shall not discuss here. In their various ways these people both *derive* pleasure from their creative work and *give* pleasure to others through books and film. In New Zealand today we are well served by botanical artists and photographers, whereas sustained writing—and of course I am not talking of specialist scientific writing—is almost non-existent. We have had nothing recently to compare with Guthrie-Smith’s *Tutira*, Leonard Cockayne’s *New Zealand Plants and Their Story*, or, to take just a few overseas examples, Edgar Anderson’s *Plants, Man and Life*, Marston Bates’ *The Forest and the Sea*, Paul B. Sears’ *The Biology of the Living Landscape*, Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County*

*Almanac*, Rene Dubos' *A God Within*. True we have a multitude of bits and pieces, exemplified especially by the current part-work, *New Zealand's Nature Heritage*, but we lack any overall view of plants and vegetation in our country that relates them to our everyday life.

The poet and the humorist, by and large, bypass plants in New Zealand. It is hard to imagine a book as delightful as Andrew Young's *A Prospect of Flowers: A Book About Wild Flowers*—a prose work by a poet—ever appearing in this country. Take, for example, the opening sentences of the first two paragraphs in the chapter entitled "Types of Botanist", and you will perhaps see what I mean.

While many botanists have described the various types of plants, no one so far as I know has described the various types of botanist. An account of plants usually begins with the Buttercup family, which offers in the common Buttercup a simple type of plant; so I begin with our Village Schoolmistress, who is certainly a simple type of botanist.

About humour, Edward de Bono (*N.Z. Listener*, May 15, 1976) has this to say.

Humour is a better indicator of the type of system operating in the brain than is, say, reason. The point about humour is that you are looking at something in a certain way, and then you suddenly have to switch the way you were looking at it. In hindsight you can see that the alternative way was there all along, but that you'd gone straight past it. So the parallel with lateral thinking is very close.

I suppose everyone must have seen Edward Lear's marvellous creations under the heading of "Nonsense Botany", with such names as Sophtsuggia Glutinosa and Nasticreechia Krorluppia. But I wonder how many are familiar with Piet Hein's *Grooks* (illustrated rhymed epigrams). Here's one titled "The Miracle of Spring".

We glibly talk  
of nature's laws  
but do things have  
a natural cause?  
Black earth turned into  
yellow crocus  
is undiluted  
hocus pocus.

Although humour is an "absolutely basic human characteristic" New Zealand examples of humour to do with plants are both hard to find and mostly of the "unconscious" kind. Take, for example, the Ministry of Works sign which reads: "Caution—heavy plant crossing road", or the following paragraph from *New Zealand's Nature Heritage* (page 1250).

The horopitos have been in New Zealand a long time — fossil pollen has been found from the Oligocene epoch, some 30 million years ago. In earlier times, the plants were used by the Maoris as medicine.

To end let me say how much I appreciate the *one* joke in the *Flora of New Zealand*. The figure on page 15 of the second volume illustrates de Bono's thesis perfectly—except that one has to employ *rotational* thinking as well as *lateral* thinking.

A. P. DRUCE