

Why plants mean so much to me

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Many years ago when I was a boy growing up in the Christchurch suburb of St Albans I became enchanted with birds. I decided to try and attract them to the family garden by planting native trees and shrubs. I never lost my love of birds, but my growing collection of native flora opened my eyes wide to the wonder of plant life too. Everything about plants amazed and captivated me – the way they grew (too slowly for the impatient eye, but so dramatic over time), how they tantalised with their shy promise of flowers, their magical beauty, their astonishing diversity of form and faculty, their edibility (or not), the way their comforting greenery hugged me close whenever I walked into my “bush”, the excitement of realising how much there was to know about plants and vegetation, and that the fount of such knowledge was inexhaustible; I would never be bored again!

Around the time I started University studies in Botany, I recall seeing a picture in a magazine. It showed a metal sculpture of a tree, splendid in its own limited way, but the caption made me snort in disbelief. “When mankind has destroyed all the real plants in the world, don’t worry,” the story read, “artists will still be making beautiful representations of remembered trees, such as this one on the Boston Common.” How ignorant and foolish, I thought. They must know that without real plants there would be no artists – or farmers, or magazine editors, or economists, or politicians, or bankers, or any sort of human beings at all.

Of course many people, although totally dependent on the natural world for their very existence, nevertheless take it all for granted. More recently I was discussing with the Banks Peninsula road engineer their methods of “managing” roadside vegetation – that is, they slash, spray, and massacre it as if the only values worth considering involve the unhindered passage of motor vehicles from A to B. He is a nice man, Alan. “I’m listening”, he said, “but you must realise I don’t share your interest in plants. They mean nothing to me.”

“Nothing”, I thought, “except the food you eat, the air you breathe, the wine you drink, the thoughts your brain occasionally concocts, the petrol you squander in your vehicles, your house, your woodstove, your grandchildren, your everything.”

I love plants because they are beautiful, they fascinate, they challenge as well as powering my brain, they feed us, they exhale oxygen, they surround us, clothing almost every surface, they sustain all the animals that still manage to share the planet with us, they endlessly delight. It’s not rocket science. Without them we are nothing.