Fifty Plants That Changed the Course of History

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The fascinating stories of the plants that changed civilizations.

Fifty Plants that Changed the Course of History is a beautifully presented guide to the plants that have had the greatest impact on human civilization. Entries feature a description of the plant, its botanical name, its native range and its primary functions -- edible, medicinal, commercial or practical. Concise text is highlighted by elegant botanical drawings, paintings and photographs as well as insightful quotes.

Many of the plants are well known, such as **rice, tea, cotton, rubber, wheat, sugarcane, tobacco, wine grapes and corn**. However, there are also many whose stories are less known. These history-changing plants include:

Agave, used to make sisal, poison arrows, bullets, tequila and surgical thread
Pineapple, which influenced the construction of greenhouses and conservatories
Hemp, used for hangman's rope, sustainable plastics, the Declaration of Independence and Levi's jeans
Coconut, used for coir fiber, soap, margarine, cream, sterile IV drips and coagulants
Eucalyptus, used in mouthwash, diuretics, vitamins, honey, underwear and fire-resistant uniforms
Sweet pea, which Gregor Mendel used in his research on genetic heredity
White mulberry, used to make silk
English oak, used for fire-resistant structures, dyes, leather tanning, charcoal, casks and ships
White willow, used in the manufacture of aspirin, cricket bats, hot-air balloon baskets and coffins This attractive reference provides an innovative perspective on both botanical and human history.

Fifty Plants That Changed the Course of History Details

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From Reader Review Fifty Plants That Changed the Course of History for online ebook

Jie-Yun Ling says

Bill introduces these plants, covering their economic, political and industrial history. It is interesting to know those anecdotes; the Declaration of Independence is written in a marijuana paper, and some of those important politicians like Gorge Washington and Thomas Jefferson had big marijuana farms at that time and made a fortune from them; a eucalyptus has rainbow colors on its bark; an olive tree has no growth ring to find out how old it is; an oak tree need about 50 years to produce its first acorns; hops are the reasons why bear tastes bitter and separate itself from malt whiskey; vanilla is a species of vanilla orchid, and its fruit will only be produced after pollination is done. There are still more to tell in the book, and I enjoyed it.

Sesana says

Some odd choices, and some really odd groupings. The sweet pea really doesn't belong in this book, and it really shouldn't be paired with green peas. And I noticed some weak history: yes, Louis XVI was beheaded after the storming of the Bastille- four years later. And to say that Marie Antoinette "probably" didn't say, "Let them eat cake," is an incredible understatement, because she flat out factually didn't. If I noticed a couple of these in just a few pages, how many others are in this book that I just didn't notice?

HBalikov says

The only other rating given to this book is 3 stars with no comment. Even if it resides exclusively in the bathroom it deserves better (the Uncle John's Bathroom Readers are consistently 4 stars).

Sure there is an amount of trivia included about each plant that will allow you to sound authoritative at the water cooler or cocktail party, but Bill Laws does a fine job of giving you, not only historical significance, but also ecological significance of each. Plants are classified as to whether their contributions have been edible, medicinal, commercial or practical. The book is well thought-out and nicely illustrated.
(borrowing from the book's own description)
Many of the plants are well known, such as rice, tea, cotton, rubber, wheat, sugarcane, tobacco, wine grapes and corn. However, there are also many whose stories are less known. These history-changing plants include:

* Agave, used to make sisal, poison arrows, bullets, tequila and surgical thread
* Pineapple, which influenced the construction of greenhouses and conservatories
* Hemp, used for hangman's rope, sustainable plastics, the Declaration of Independence and jeans
* Coconut, used for coir fiber, soap, margarine, cream, sterile IV drips and coagulants
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* Sweet pea, which Gregor Mendel used in his research on genetic heredity
* White mulberry, used to make silk
* English oak, used for fire-resistant structures, dyes, leather tanning, charcoal, casks and ships
* White willow, used in the manufacture of aspirin, hot-air balloon baskets and coffins

Bob says

The concept is much better than the execution. There is a lot more trivia than evidence that these 50 plants all had a significant impact on history. Eg, in the summary that starts each article, onion “assisted with the classification of the world’s plants and helped to create the stereotypical image of the Frenchman…” In my opinion, no plant contributed to classification – that was done by botanists, and the British stereotype of Frenchmen is a trivial contribution to history, and one that did not require onions. Similarly pineapple is credited with the origin of hothouses in Europe, but greenhouses would surely have become common when technology allowed, without demand for pineapples, which could easily be shipped from tropical plantations.
Other questionable choices as plants that changed the course of history: those that some of us treasure, but have had slight impact on history: Cilantro: “What would Indian cookery be without …Cilantro”; Saffron – the world’s most expensive spice; Cardamom; Hops; Sweet Pea; Lavender; Crabapple (as opposed to Apple); etc. Like the crabapple, there are numerous choices that would have been better had a higher level been chosen: Oak vs English Oak, Rose vs Dog Rose, Orange vs Sweet Orange, Cotton vs Upland Cotton, Pea vs Sweet Pea, Willow vs White Willow, Wheat vs Common Wheat. In many cases the articles are actually about the broader group, so why use the more specific title in these cases.
Ferns are included because they are said to have given rise to coal, but coal first formed from clubmosses, so we didn’t need the ferns to get coal); Sunflower is a less important source of edible oil than rapeseed and oil palm - where are the chapters on them? – Van Gogh was not made famous by the sunflower.
The eurocentricity of the book is betrayed by the sidebar on Filipendula ulmaria in the Willow chapter. which the British call meadowsweet (yes the UK is in Europe despite what some Brexiteers would have you believe). In North America, meadowsweet refers to native Spirea shrubs.
In addition, and most seriously, while good-looking, this book contains too many misleading and incorrect statements. For example: Introduction para#2: “Plants may have paved the way for us, evolving …photosynthesis in response to some prehistoric climate catastrophe…” First, photosynthesis evolved in blue-green algae, a bacterium, not plants. Second, photosynthesis didn’t evolve in response to a climate catastrophe – the ability to photosynthesize is clearly advantageous in any environment in which there is sunlight and not unlimited food, so selection pressure would favour photosynthesis when a rudimentary form of it occurred in an ancient bacterium. In the next paragraph, the figure of 470 million years understates the history of plants by more than a factor of 2 – there is fossil evidence of green algae over a billion years ago.
The last sentence on page 79: ”eucalyptus may be used to aid rapid reforestation of [Haiti and Ethiopia]" – even though earlier on the same page the author recognizes the devastation that these plants have wrought on native vegetation when planted outside their native Australia – native plants should be used for reforestation instead.
P. 115 China consumes 266l of beer per capita annually - over 3 times as much as the USA? Actually China consumes 7 times less - about 40% as much beer as the US per capita, according to the WHO in 2014.
p. 119 “Seeds represent the most important development in the evolution of plants” – what about spores and vascular tissue that enabled plants to grow more than a few inches tall? or the original absorption of a cyanobacterium that enabled plants to photosynthesize?
p. 130 “Xi’an (Siam, now Thailand)” Actually Xi’an is a former capital of China that is 1800km north of the northernmost Thailand
p. 142 “Olympic Games held …[in] Athens” – actually in Olympia - 300km away
A lot of the trivia is entertaining, but can you believe what you read?

Marie Winger says

This was fun. Apparently there are a lot of theses 50 somethings that changed history. Not a lot of in depth info for a lot of the plants. I did learn some interesting stuff. Definitely left leaning bent to text. Some had a lot of historical info but others were very lean.

Sherry Sharpnack says

This book was an interesting compendium of gossipy information about fifty plants that the author found important. I'd quibble on the plant selections; for example, I'm not sure how the sweet pea is important when the author spent more time in that chapter on GREEN peas, but OK.

The chapters were very chatty, for the most part, and tended to be kind of light on actual historic info. My major frustration was that the chapters ended very abruptly in many cases, mostly w/o any good summation or even modern uses. The chapter on the tulip ended its history in the 1700's I think.

Anyway, if you want a light intro to some plants and where they originated, this book could give you a start. Don't read it for botanical informational purposes, though.

Elaine says

This was a good overview of 50 well-known plants that have had a great impact on human civilization and culture. I didn't read every one of them, but it's a great book for flipping through and finding interesting tidbits about these various plants. The amount of coverage for each plant is short and sweet.

Rebecca says

You don't normally think of plants as changing the course of history, but they have. This book goes over fifty plants that have influenced human behavior, often in dark ways. Opium caused China's collapse, sugar cane set off the slavery trade out of Africa, tulips were responsible for an economic crash in Holland.

An interesting historical look at how plants have affected human behavior over time.

Melissa says

Absolutely loved this book. Used it to help me study for my Plants course. Great pictures, historical facts.

Ann says

With 2-6 pages devoted to each plant, it doesn't really get into much depth, and some of the choices seem very odd. For instance there's an entry on the sweet pea because Princess Diana used them in her bouquet...and then it segues into the edible pea and Mendel's genetics work. Why not make the entry on the edible pea instead? Surely if any pea has changed the course of history it's that one, not the sweet pea. In

general the information isn't anything you couldn't get in more depth from Wikipedia. And some of the entries sound ripped right from James Burke's 'Connections' series.

However, it is a gorgeous book, beautifully bound with lovely illustrations.

Joel says

If the book was entitled "50 random facts related to plants that could be found in human history", I wouldn't be so critical, but I also may not have read the book.
Rather than talk to what the title was about, how different plants changed the course of human history, it decided to focus on these cute instances in which the plants showed up in history, but didn't really have that much effect on the wider human existence.
He talks about the pea, how a queen loved the pretty flowers, but failed to relay the fact that it was one of the few legumes that Europeans had before the arrival of beans from America. He skims over the importance of Sunflowers, but insists that the great gift of the sunflower was that it can be found in Van Gogh's paintings. Some of the plants he does OK on but then you read about how bamboo; where he skims over the fact that it dramatically changed and advanced Chinese civilization, however he then launches into 2 pages about bamboo brushes and how they are used in Japanese paintings.

Charlotte Stevenson says

I really enjoyed learning about everything from the history of tea to how the onion is responsible for the French stereotype that still prevails today. Plants surround us and are everywhere in our day to day lives as much as anything else, if not more! We definitely do not appreciate them enough and I think for this reason that it should be mandatory reading for everyone. I learnt so much that I didn't know before and just walking down the street and seeing common weeds, I am now able to consider a little about how exactly they came to be there and how they might not have been if it weren't for the history that human kind has spun.

Eduardo Cesar Dias says

Livro extremamente interessante e informativo. Pena que a tradução e revisão deixam muito a desejar.

Am Y says

As an avid gardener and someone with a keen interest in horticulture, the book's premise was interesting to me from the onset: learn about 50 plants that have made a major impact on humanity. Each of the plants listed has approximately 2-6 pages dedicated to it, and the book describes how the plants were first "discovered" and put to use, and how this usage has (or has not) evolved over the ages.

E.g. Rubber used to be an extremely important commodity, but since the invention of synthetic rubber, production of natural rubber has fallen greatly.

Plants mentioned range from staples like rice, wheat, barley, soybean and corn, to herbs and spices like cilantro, pepper, chilli, etc, to stuff that just tastes nice (e.g. wine grapes for wine, cacao for chocolate, etc) to ornamentals grown simply for their looks (e.g. tulips). And also plants with medicinal value and those that have addictive properties (e.g. cocaine from coca, opium from poppies, caffeine from coffee, etc).

If the plant has been selectively bred or "altered", this is mentioned. E.g. kale, broccoli, cauliflower, and more all originated from wild cabbage, and will revert to it if left for long enough in the wild. There is also a short mention of GM crops.

But I didn't like the entry on apples - the book implied that the modern day apples we eat are descended from crabapples. This is entirely not true. Wild apples are a species of their own and exist in their own right; the relation to crabapples was due to cross-pollination with them which resulted in the sharing of genetic material.

The book also failed to mention cinnamon, which I'm quite sure is a major spice.

On the whole I liked seeing which plants the book regarded as "history-changing", but the research done on each plant, and the way each plant is written about, could be much better.

Madhav says

“Fifty Plants that Changed the Course of History” is an interesting read. Bill Wells has chosen fifty plants that have effectively changed the way in which mankind has progressed.
The book is organized to explore one plant at a time, talking about its aspects such as its history, cultivation, unique characteristics and anecdotes, and how that plant played a large part in history. For example, it has information about the fern, as it documents its prehistoric origins, the conditions in which it lived, and its contribution to history - it is one of the main plants that contributed organic material to the millenia-long process of producing nonrenewable fuels.
I found the information interesting and compelling to read, as I have always been interested in plant life. This book is very accessible in that it does not use elevated scientific terms to describe things - any concept that may seem foreign to someone without a science background is explained very thoroughly. For example, it explains Mendelian genetics with a historical background very well in the section about the sweet pea, in a way that is not didactic or overbearing, and is instead informational while still being entertaining. This quality of Law’s writing carries throughout the book.
I found this book to be interesting, but some particular sections are a little dry and uninteresting. However, the structure of this book seems to be strategic in that if an individual is not interested in a particular plant or its history and contributions, they can simply flip to the next plant without consequences.
Overall, I believe this book is a great read for those interested in the ways that botany has contributed to humankind’s progress. It is written in plain language without any scientific snobbishness, and is thus very friendly to those who are not from a scientific background. It is thorough, almost to the edge of boring, but manages to remain entertaining nonetheless. I would recommend this book to anyone who is even slightly curious about botany and how it has impacted the course of history, no matter what their scientific background is.
