

# Beyond Plant Blindness:

SEEING THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANTS FOR A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

by Dawn Sanders FLS, Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir & Mark Wilson

ABOVE:  
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson  
(2018) *Searching for Stipa*  
(Tapestry)  
(14m x 1.5m) installed  
in Hus B, Pedagogen,  
University of Gothenburg.

BELOW LEFT:  
Beyond Plant Blindness  
book cover.

BELOW RIGHT:  
Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson  
(2017) *Searching for  
Stipa #1* (1.5m x 14m)  
installation in Stolpboden,  
Botaniska.



We know that plants are important to humans; and yet, the general awareness of plants appears to be low in many societies (Knapp, 2019). There are probably several reasons for this state of affairs, which have been discussed in papers concerning ‘plant blindness’ (e.g. Wandersee & Schussler, 2001; Sanders, 2019b), but the essence of the challenge is in what we perceive as the *otherness* of plants; many life processes of plants are fundamentally different from ours, which makes it hard to identify with them (Eriksen & Sanders, 2020). Living on a planet in which ‘Plants = Life’ (Galbraith, 2003) means that human societies cannot afford its citizens to be impervious to the importance of plants and conservation issues related to plant extinction. But how might we support those who have become estranged from the contributions plants make to the planet in valuing plants beyond an instrumentalist view, which sees them only as an ever-available and unlimited resource?

## Static and silent, or complex and social?

The everyday life of a plant can sometimes appear to be static and silent to human perception (Myers, 2015; Sanders, 2019a). And yet, as modern science narratives reveal, we are realising that plants live in complex, and surprisingly social worlds (e.g. Brooker *et al*, 2008). As has long been the case with animal ‘others’,

removing plants from the human view makes it easier for us to exploit them and appears to suppress our ability to see into their worlds. Human perceptions in this regard are often contingent on the cultural environment in which plants live, and their consequently associated narratives. In contemporary city life, the complex morphologies and behaviours plants possess are customarily stripped away and conflated in simplistic terms, such as ‘house-plant’, ‘street-tree’, and ‘food’. Such habitual categorisation blinds us to the incalculable contributions plants make in the ecological fabric of life on Earth; the synergetic, temporal and socio-biological systems of which they, and we, are co-constituents (see Knapp, 2019).

In recent years, an interdisciplinary nexus has been generated around what it means to experience *Life as Plant*. From the science of plant behaviours (e.g. Chamovitz, 2012) to plant-based philosophy (e.g. Hall, 2011), plant enquiries are crossing disciplinary and conceptual boundaries. In our own research study, *Beyond Plant Blindness: Seeing the importance of plants for a sustainable world* (2013–17), funded by the Swedish Research Council, we asked how, by taking a different view, through an interdisciplinary lens, might we improve our understanding and sensitivity to the lives of plants?

## The project

One of the critical elements of our project was to bring together a research team that combined perspectives equally from education (Dawn Sanders & Eva Nyberg), art-based research (Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir & Mark Wilson) and botanical science (Bente Eriksen). The researchers represented universities in Sweden (University of Gothenburg, Lund University, in Iceland (Iceland University of the Arts), and the UK (University of Cumbria, Institute of the Arts). As part of the project, a doctoral inquiry by Margaretha Häggström, examining relationships between humans and a specific forest site (Häggström, 2020) was also funded, in the educational context of the study.

The primary strand of inquiry was oriented around responses to site-specific art installations emerging from the artists’ research work in Gothenburg Botanic Garden, Sweden. The artworks were sited both in the garden and in the education faculty house (pedagogen) *snaebjornsdottir/wilson/botaniska*. In association with the art-based



research, an online survey of 202 trainee teachers at Gothenburg University was undertaken. The survey contained 30 questions concerning perceptions of, and knowledge about, plants (Nyberg *et al*, 2019). Further work concerned the types of rainforest display offered in botanic glasshouses at two sites: Gothenburg Botanic Garden and Universeum, a science centre (Nyberg *et al*, 2019).

The research team set out to urge a philosophical and actionable move beyond ‘plant blindness’ (Hall, 2011; Balding & Williams, 2016) and so to disrupt what is perceived as a debilitating human view (Balas & Momsen, 2014). As noted above, the imperative is for humans to engage conceptually and responsibly with non-human organisms possessing entirely different physiologies and behaviours. In our engagement with such difference, it is vital that we are not diverted into subjecting plants to human registers and ‘terms of resemblance’ (Houle, 2011) but rather to engage with their ‘plantness’ (Darley, 1990), an approach equating to interspecific ‘parities in meeting’ (Snæbjörnsdóttir & Wilson, 2010).

## Beyond plant blindness

In the Spring of 2020, a new book, published by The Green Box in Berlin, was released (*Beyond Plant Blindness*), focusing on the art-based research, the interpretations of affect and impact in the art installations, elements of the doctoral study together with invited essays from academics in the arts, museum curatorship, and visual studies. As editors of the book, and researchers engaged in the project, we wished to deepen connections emerging from the original research and build a wider discourse extending from a seminar held in Gothenburg in 2018. To this end, the book seeks to provoke plant-based thinking across a landscape of disciplines in order to consider art as a way of re-thinking approaches to plants and botanical science.

## TOP & MIDDLE:

Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson (2017) *Searching for Stipa #2* installation in the Rain shelter, Botaniska (installation detail)

## BOTTOM:

Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson (2017) *Scans, Seeds and Stories* installation at Floras Rike Gallery, Botaniska

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