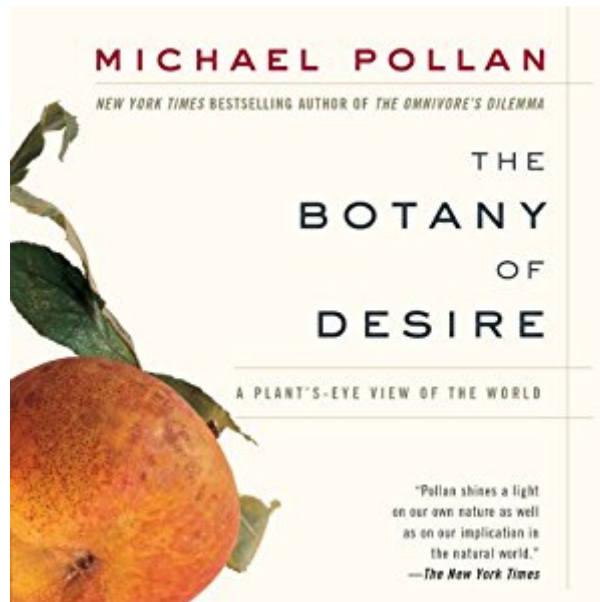


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The Botany Of Desire



Synopsis

The book that helped make Michael Pollan, the New York Times bestselling author of *Cooked* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, one of the most trusted food experts in America. Every schoolchild learns about the mutually beneficial dance of honeybees and flowers: the bee collects nectar and pollen to make honey and, in the process, spreads the flowers' genes far and wide. In *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan ingeniously demonstrates how people and domesticated plants have formed a similarly reciprocal relationship. He masterfully links four fundamental human desires—sweetness, beauty, intoxication, and control—with the plants that satisfy them: the apple, the tulip, marijuana, and the potato. In telling the stories of four familiar species, Pollan illustrates how the plants have evolved to satisfy humankind's most basic yearnings. And just as we've benefited from these plants, we have also done well by them. So who is really domesticating whom? Praise for the narrator: "Scott Brick uses his skill with expression to produce an audible intoxication."
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Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Two different people sent me copies last week of Michael Pollan's book, *The Botany of Desire*. I'm a writer (*Allergy-Free Gardening*, from Ten Speed Press) myself and a lifetime horticulturist and I guess they figured I'd appreciate this book. They were right too. I found this book extremely hard to put down. Pollan is a writer first and a botanist second but he is remarkably observant about horticultural matters. He is also unusually talented at explaining complex ideas and he does so in a

way that is fresh, fun, often funny, and surprisingly profound. Pollan's section on Johnny Appleseed alone is worth the price of the book. Here Johnny is a multi-dimensional character, one not just eccentric, but a shrewd fellow with great vision and considerable human frailty. The Botany of Desire is chiefly the history of the tulip, apples in America, cannabis, and the potato. This may not sound like the recipe for a really satisfying read, but in Michael Pollan's more than able hands, it certainly is. If you enjoy gardening, history, or just plain old very decent writing, I expect you too would appreciate this excellent book.

"What existential difference is there between the human being's role in this (or any) garden and the bumblebees?" "Did I choose to plant these potatoes, or did the potato make me do it? With profound questions like these, Michael Pollan pollinates your mind with a new world view of our relationships with plants, one in which humans are not at the center. The book focuses on four primary examples of how plants provide benefits to humans that lead humans to benefit the plants (apples for sweetness, tulips for beauty, marijuana for intoxication, and the potato for control over nature's food supply). You will learn many new facts in the process that will fascinate you. The book's main value is that you will learn that we need to be more thoughtful in how we assist in the evolution of plant species. The book builds on Darwin's original observations about how artificial evolution occurs (evolution directed by human efforts). So-called domesticated species thrive while the wild ones we admire often do not. Compare dogs to wolves as an example. Mr. Pollan challenges the mental separation we make between wild and domesticated species successfully in the book. The apple section was my favorite. You will learn that John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed) was a rather odd fellow who was actually in the business of raising and selling apple trees. He planted a few seeds at the homes where he stayed overnight on his travels. Mr. Chapman had apple tree nurseries all over Ohio and Indiana, which he started 2-3 years before he expected an influx of settlers. Homesteading laws required these settlers to plant 50 apple or pears trees in order to take title to the land. And these apples were for making hard apple cider, not eating apples. He was the "American Dionysus" in Mr. Pollan's view. Apple trees need to be grafted to make good eating apples. Chapman's trees produced many genetic variations, which are good for the species. Apple trees became more narrow in their genes after other sources for alcohol and sweetness became available (from cane sugar). Now, the ancient genes of apple trees are being kept in living form from Kazakhstan, before they are lost due to economic development. Tulips were the source of the famous Tulipmania in Holland. Rare colors occurred due to viruses. Those became extremely valuable during the tulip boom market in the 17th century. Now, growers try to keep the viruses out

and we have much more dull, consistent species. We have probably lost much beauty in favor of order in the process. The intoxicants in marijuana are probably caused by toxins that the plants make to kill off insects. Because the plant is a weed, it grows very rapidly. There is a hilarious story about the author's experiences in growing two plants that you will love. As the antidrug war progressed, marijuana became a hothouse plant and was bred and developed to grow much more rapidly under humid, high-light conditions indoors. You will read about modern commercial farms in Holland. The potato story is the most complex. The Irish potato famine related to monoculture. The Incas had always planted a variety of potatoes to avoid the risk of disease. Now, biotechnology has added an insecticide to the leaves of potato plants, taking monoculture one step further.

Interestingly, the insects are already becoming resistant to the insecticide. Are we building a new risk to famine with this approach? How will genetically altered potatoes affect humans? Is having consistent french fries at fast food places enough of an incentive to take this risk? These are the kinds of questions raised by this chapter. Mr. Pollan has described a "dance of human and plant desire that left neither the plants nor the people . . . unchanged." His key point is that we should be sure to include strong biodiversity in our approaches. Nature can create more variation faster than fledgling biotechnology industry can. Time has proven that biodiversity has many advantages for humans while monoculture has usually proven to have at least one major drawback. In reality, we can probably have both. If you are like me, you will find Mr. Pollan's personal experiences with the plants and his investigations of the historical figures to be fascinating. He is a good story teller, and a fine writer. After you read this book, take a walk through a park or a garden and think about Mr. Pollan's argument. Then consider how these principles can be applied to help ideas change, improve, and grow in more valuable ways. Look at life from many different perspectives . . . and live more intelligently and beneficially!

Read this book and you may never eat a conventionally grown potato again. I know I won't. If I hadn't been a dedicated organic gardener for over 40 years, I would become one after reading *THE BOTANY OF DESIRE*. I find it incredibly puzzling that more people haven't bitten the organic bullet. I truly believe a diet of conventionally grown food can shorten your life and bring on all sorts of aches, pains, and illnesses you might not otherwise suffer. Organic gardening works and the stuff you grow is better for you. If you can't grow it, for goodness sakes, hustle on down to your closest Whole Foods store and buy it. Organic food may be more expensive than conventional foods, but in the long run you will save on medical bills. Michael Pollen's book is simply the best set of gardening essays I've read in a long while, maybe ever. And that's saying a lot because I am a big fan of

gardening books (I've reviewed over 100 of them for). I haven't read something so enjoyable since Henry Mitchell's columns and books. It's not often a book of garden essays can make you laugh (misadventures with Mary Jane), make you cry (one million Irish dead of starvation), make you angry (one million Irish dead), and make you smile (is there any tulip so lovely as 'The Queen of the Night?') Pollan covers four plants, Apples, Tulips, Marijuana, and Potatoes. His first chapter on apples, disabused me of all my notions about Johnny Appleseed. I had read Anna Pavord's book THE TULIP, so the tulip section of Pollan's book was the least interesting for me, although he added some interesting anecdotal information. The best section of this book as far as I am concerned is the chapter on Marijuana. My husband is a substance abuse counselor and I recommended the chapter to him. It could have been titled, "Everything you ever wanted to know about Marijuana that they didn't tell you in medical school or criminology class." If you haven't yet decided the U.S. government officials who devised the war on drugs are nuts, read this chapter and you will become convinced. Drug war indeed!!! Didn't we learn anything with Al Capone?? The section on the potato plant is downright scary. Pollan's adventures with Monsanto are illuminating. Once again, the feds come out as the dumb bunnies. Or, maybe it's the elected officials and their appointees who won't let the EPA and USDA do it's job. The material on evolution in this section nicely complements Steve Jones' DARWIN'S GHOST. Monsanto is in the process of obtaining patents on natural substances and evolutionary processes that will affect the whole food chain-and the CEO says "trust me". Yeah, right. Do yourself a favor, during the cold weather ahead. Curl up in an easy chair with a cup of tea and read this book. Whether you garden or not, you will love it.

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