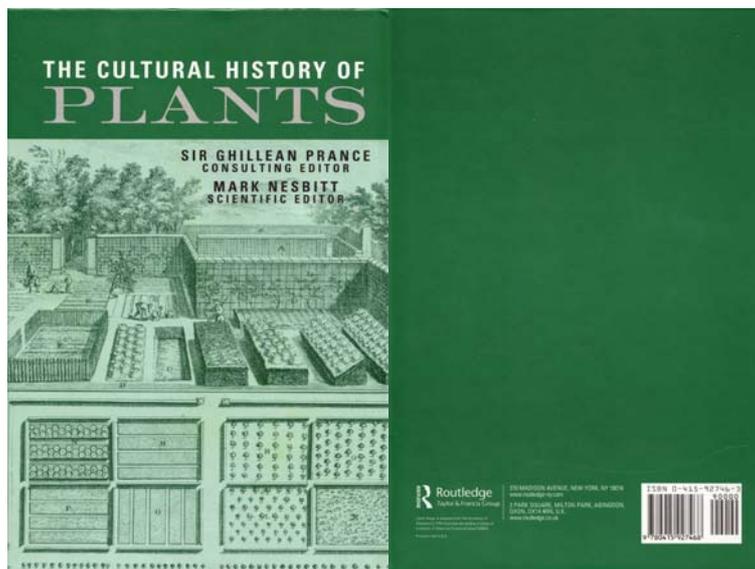


Prance, G., Sir & M. Nesbitt. 2005. *The Cultural History of Plants*. – London/New York, Routledge

Book review by A.J. Clapham



When I first saw that this book was to be published I thought at last, a book where all the information an archaeobotanist would need on the cultural history of plants, both cultivated and wild, would be present in one easy to use volume. But after I started reading I was soon to be disappointed. Unfortunately, so many errors were spotted in the first 100 pages that I could not finish the book. I do not think that writing negative reviews is a very useful process but I am afraid that in this case, it is very difficult to be positive at all.

Let's start with the basics: the book's publisher, Routledge, have a well deserved reputation for producing good quality works but that quality has definitely slipped in this case. The quality of the paper is poor, and the reproduction of the figures is appalling. The line drawings appear either to be badly scanned originals or taken from one internet source, mainly the USDA–NRCS database/Britton, N.L., and A. Brown's 'Illustrated flora of the northern states and Canada' (Brown, 1913). The plates are all in black and white and in most cases too small to be of any use; for the high price of this book it could be expected that some of the plates would have been in colour.

I also found it quite shocking to find that there was no separate scientific index for the species mentioned in the text; this makes using the index quite impossible if you only know the scientific name of the plant. One of my own personal bugbears is the use of American spelling. In this time of electronic publication surely it is possible to produce a version for each side of the Atlantic Ocean.

There are also some embarrassing editorial mishaps within some of the chapters. As I did not manage to finish the book let's just look at ones I picked up in the pages I read. In chapter six, 'Fruits' by Charles R. Clement, there are several wrongly captioned figures. On page 83, the figure labelled as date palm is in fact an *Annona* species (most likely sweetsop [*Annona squamosa*]); the date palm appears on page 90 labelled as Acerola (*Malpighia emargina*). On the same page (90), cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) is in fact the acerola and on page 92, the line figure labelled sweetsop is in fact cranberry. The same problem with mislabelling of figures occurs in chapter seven on 'Herbs and Vegetables' by J.M. Renfrew and H. Sanderson. Here on page 118 the caption for the figure is for mexican tea (*Chenopodium ambrosioides*) but is in fact purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*). The figure for mexican tea can be found on page 112, which is labelled as wild ginger (*Asarum canadense*) which in fact appears on page 125 (here labelled purslane [*Portulaca oleracea*]). If the aim of this book is to be used as a reference book for students new to the study of the cultural history of plants these mistakes are very misleading and need to be rectified in the second edition.

Indeed, if this book is to be used as a reference book for academics interested in either the cultural history of plants or archaeobotany it would have been useful to have properly referenced chapters instead of the majority of the chapters having a selected bibliography at the end of each chapter. This is especially infuriating if you are trying to trace a contentious statement and it is not fully referenced in the text. Also in many cases the references are out of date.

I suppose it is inevitable that books will be out of date before they are published but in certain cases this should not have been so. For example, the history of sorghum in Africa has advanced greatly over the past decade mainly with the work at Qasr Ibrim by Peter Rowley–Conwy using both archaeobotanical and ancient

DNA techniques (Rowley–Conwy, 1991; Rowley–Conwy *et al.*, 1997; Deakin *et al.*, 1998; Rowley–Conwy *et al.*, 1999; Shaw *et al.*, 2001); the radiocarbon dating of sorghum to 740 BC at Kawa, Sudan by Fuller (2004) puts the stated date of the earliest sorghum cultivation in Africa back by over 800 years. In chapter six there are some serious omissions: there is no mention of the importance of mulberries (*Morus nigra* and *Morus alba*) and pomegranate (*Punica granatum*), which have played an important part in the cultural history of the near and far east.

These are just a few of the errors that I picked up. I was also disappointed in the lack of use of archaeobotanical data throughout the book. Surely, one of the direct sources for the cultural history of plants is the plant remains found on archaeological sites around the world and these datasets could have enhanced the book greatly.

I thoroughly commend the authors for attempting to produce a single volume on the cultural history of plants. Unfortunately, this was let down by poor editing, poor image quality and poor and often erratic referencing. I hope that this will be corrected in the second edition. If so, it would be an excellent volume for all serious students interested in how plants have played an important and essential role in shaping every aspect of our environment. The present volume is a little confused as to whom it is aimed and I therefore suggest that readers, instead of buying this book, would be better off using the references listed in the 'General References on the History of Useful Plants' which can be found on page 433.

Prance, G., Sir & M. Nesbitt. 2005. *The Cultural History of Plants*. – London/New York, Routledge. 464 pp. ISBN 9780415927468. Price \$ 150.00 (hardback).

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