



# What Have Plants Ever Done for Us?: Western Civilization in Fifty Plants

*Stephen Harris*

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## **What Have Plants Ever Done for Us?: Western Civilization in Fifty Plants** Stephen Harris

Plants are an indispensable part of our everyday lives. From the coffee bean that gets roasted for our morning brew to the grasses that feed the animals we eat to the rubber tree that provides the raw materials used in the tires of our cars, we depend on plants for nearly every aspect of our lives.

With *What Have Plants Ever Done for Us?*, Stephen Harris takes readers step by chronological step through the role of plants in the rise of the Western world, with sojourns through the history of trade, travel, politics, chemistry, and medicine. Plants are our most important food source. Some, such as barley, have been staples since the earliest times. Others, like the oil palm, are relative newcomers to the Western world. Over time, the ways we use some plants has also dramatically changed: Beets, a familiar sight on the dinner plate, were once thought to be an effective treatment for leprosy and now show significant promise as a sustainable biofuel. What, one wonders, might the future thus hold for the mandrake or woad? Plants have also held potent cures to some of our most prevalent diseases. An extract from the bark of the yew tree, for instance, is commonly used in the treatment of cancer.

Wide-ranging and thoroughly engaging, *What Have Plants Ever Done for Us?* will help readers cultivate a deeper appreciation for our branched and rooted friends who ask little in return for their vast contributions save for a little care and water.

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