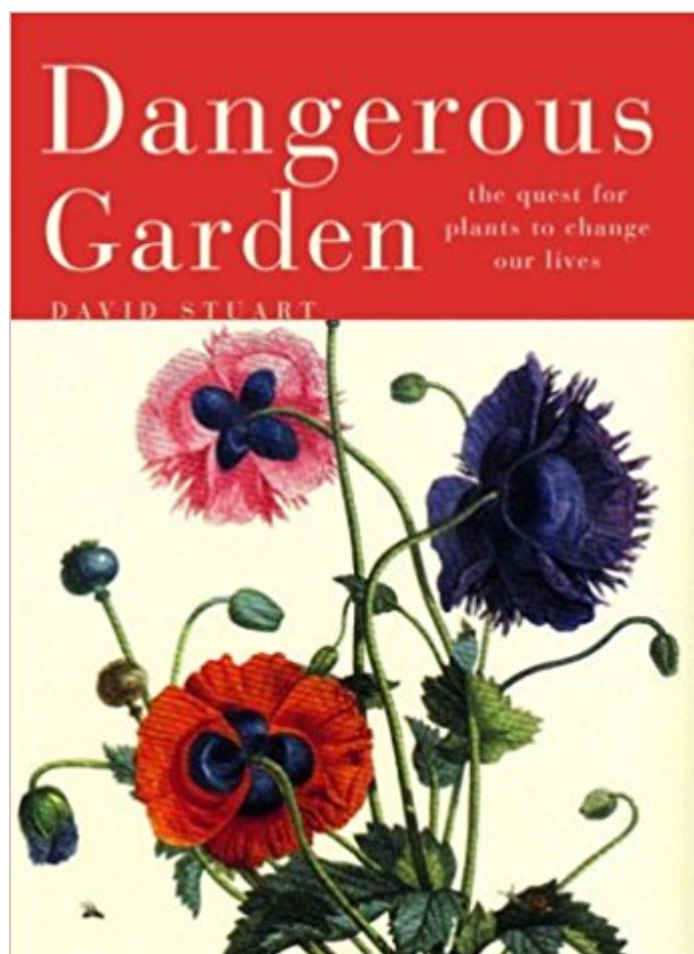


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# Dangerous Garden: The Quest For Plants To Change Our Lives



## Synopsis

As our earliest ancestors migrated out of Africa, they encountered entirely new floras. By sampling these, they found plants that appeared to (and sometimes did) heal wounds, cure maladies, and ease troubled minds. This process of discovery continues today, as multinational pharmaceutical companies bioprospect in the globe's remaining wild places for the next tamoxifen or digitalis. The gardener and botanist David Stuart tells the fascinating story of botanical medicine, revealing more than soothing balms and heroic cures. Most of the truly powerful and effective medicinal plants are double-edged, with a dark side to balance the light. They can heal or kill, calm or enslave, lift depression or summon our gods and monsters. Often the difference between these polar effects is a simple change in dosage. Stuart chronicles the tale of how the herbal materia medica of healing and killing plants has sparked wars, helped establish intercontinental trade routes, and seeded fortunes. As plant species traveled the globe, their medicinal uses evolved over miles and through centuries. Plants once believed to be cure-alls are now considered too dangerous for use. Others, once so valuable that they sowed the wealth of empires, are merely spices on the kitchen shelf. David Stuart recounts engrossing human stories too, not only of the scientists, explorers, and doctors who gathered, named, and prescribed these plants but also the shamans, magicians, and quacks who claimed to possess the ultimate herbal aphrodisiac or elixir.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Enthralling and splendidly illustrated. Stuart was prompted to write this book in reaction to the sentimentality about natural remedies that is so pervasive today. And, certainly, here is a book to

wipe that placid smile off your face and replace it with a rictus of pleasurable horror...Aside from frightening tidbits, Stuart serves up a historical feast of quackery and delusion; of poisonings, medical, marital, and dynastic; of great events and far-reaching movements triggered by plants; and of 'our vain attempts to forget, to slow or to stop entirely our descent in [Death's] arms.' (Katherine A. Powers Boston Globe 2004-07-04) Many people think of new pharmaceuticals being brewed up from chemicals in the labs of companies such as Pfizer and Merck. While this is often so, a full 40 percent of the drugs behind the pharmacist's counter in the Western world are derived from plants that people have used for centuries. For instance, quinine from tree bark relieves malaria, and licorice from a root has been an ingredient in cough drops for more than 3,500 years. Stuart examines how different peoples have used these and many other medicinal plants at different times. Such medications have affected civilizations by stemming both ferocious plagues and common maladies. Stuart illustrates this as he documents a host of medicinal plants from a historical perspective. (Science News 2004-05-29) As he brilliantly guides the reader through the history of humanity's complex relationship with the plant kingdom, and our relentless pursuit of remedies, restoratives, or recreational panaceas, Stuart reminds us that as long as humans have walked the earth, their destinies have been intricately woven with those of the plants around them. Lavishly illustrated, exhaustively researched, Stuart's investigation of the plants that have changed civilizations is an opulent, intriguing account of both plants and the people who exploit them. (Carol Haggas Booklist 2004-06-01) In *Dangerous Gardens*, David Stuart trots us along the thorny hedgerows of history, following the search for botanical deliverance from aches and aging, plagues and poisons, insufficient libido and unwanted pregnancy. (Patrice Clark Koelsch Ruminator Review 2004-06-01) There seems hardly a plant or story that Stuart has overlooked as he charts the relationship of humans and plants over more than 2,000 years...Reading Stuart's book is almost like sipping a draft of poppy juice: the garden seems suddenly transformed from a benign wash of colour and fragrance to a protean bed of potential miracles and murders. (Meryl Simonds Montreal Gazette 2004-07-17) Plants are entwined with human history--aesthetically, spiritually and physically. This gorgeous book describes flora that cure and those that kill (usually a matter of dosage). It also documents society's quest for health, freedom from pain, good sex and enlightenment. Every turned page reveals another exquisite illustration, framing taut and witty prose that reads like fiction. We travel from ancient Egypt to medieval apothecaries, into equatorial rain forests and along trade routes to Asia. We learn of healers and those who would be healed, along with imperialists, quacks, criminals and other denizens of the 'dark side.' (Lili Singer Los Angeles Times 2004-09-09) Rhubarb for syphilis? Belladonna for beauty? In a handsomely illustrated text,

Stuart catalogs the medical uses--both valuable and dubious--of a wide variety of plants. Consider, for example, species of the genus *Artemisia*, extracts of which have given rise to a promising new treatment for malaria as well as to the drink absinthe, under whose influence Van Gogh may have sliced off his ear. (Discover 2005-01-01) Stuart tells the fascinating tale of botanical medicine; the earliest human ancestors found plants to heal wounds, cure diseases, and ease troubled minds. The use of medicinal plants, however, has been a double-edged affair; plants heal or kill people, calm or enslave them, lift them from depression or summon gods and demons. These contrasting effects result from slight changes in dosage. In this beautifully illustrated book, Stuart describes how the herbal plants helped intercontinental trade routes and seeded the wealth of empires. For example, yew, a favorite Roman poison, now provides the basis for a cancer drug; rhubarb, once thought to cure syphilis, is now a popular pie filling. Readers will learn about history's complex relationship with the plant kingdom in the pursuit of cures for pain or recreational panaceas. (S. M. Paracer Choice 2005-02-01)

David Stuart, a botanist, has been a columnist for *The Sunday Times* of London and also a nurseryman. He is the author of a number of books, including *The Garden Triumphant: A Victorian Legacy*.

This book is a good introduction to the complex history of humans and plants. Indeed, this is such an essential relationship, extending from basic foodstuffs and clothing to biofuels, narcotics and medicines, that one could argue this relationship has defined us as a species. The author reveals many plants that I'd never heard of as being candidates for either further research or potential as new snakeoils for a society willing to believe nature hides the next "magic bullet" against what ails us. The fascination of people with sex, immortality, intoxication and beauty will continue to compel mankind to seek succor and solace in the chlorophyll kingdom. The marriage can never be broken, to be sure, but a lack of understanding of what plants can really deliver will often result in people's disillusionment with the initial promise of paradise. Little wonder that Genesis used a fruit as the symbol of man's hopes and dashed dreams.

As a student of herbal folklore, this is a wonderful addition to my source material!

"Dangerous Garden" is an EXCELLENT book on the history of plants and how humans interact with plants, a topic that I stumbled onto only about a couple of years ago. The book is broken up into

eight chapters that cover about 200 pages. There are lots of pictures and color plates, so each chapter is almost a stand-alone section that is just the right length to be read over an afternoon or spread out over a couple of nights at bedtime. Each chapter covers a category of use or effect that humans have tried to get out of plants. The chapters are: - The Great Afflictions, covering plants thought to affect diseases such as bubonic plague, malaria and leprosy. - The Vital Organs, covering plants thought to affect vital organs such as the heart, stomach, etc. - The Flight from Pain, or the search for pain-relievers, with an extensive section on opium. - Chasing Venus, which is kind of self-explanatory. - The Killing Plants, very self-explanatory. - The Seven Ages of Man, meaning plants that are supposed to prolong life, maintain a youthful appearance, or otherwise slow the passage of time. - The Mind, or plants that affect the mind and have been both revered and demonized because of it, including marijuana, cocaine, tobacco and qat. - The Mysteries of the Gods, which covers plants used in religious and shamanic ceremonies, such as peyote. The book is definitely not a lightweight and people looking for serious information will find a lot of worth. Plants are referred to both by their common name and their scientific names and the index covers both types of terms as well. The Bibliography includes books from 1516 to the 1990s, and the Author's Acknowledgments on the last page list a number of good websites as well. Stuart discusses the historical uses of various plants and how some plants have gone from being cure-alls in the past to being either banned or sold in the grocery-store spice aisle now. He spends a lot of time on the concept of Janus plants, which are "two-faced" plants, meaning they can both harm and heal, and he also discusses fads in medicine, including a long period of time in the middle ages where if a plant had a visible effect it was thought to be better than one that didn't have a visible effect, so plants that made people sweaty, feverish, nauseous, sleepy, etc. were prescribed in amounts that are horrifying by today's standards. Some authors talk down to readers, but this author absolutely does not and will jump from discussion of which 19th-century herbal contained which plant to discussion of the exact chemical names of the active alkaloids in a plant, if they are unknown than which other known alkaloids do they resemble, and what current research is being done and current uses and/or speculation. There are also numerous little facts sprinkled here and there throughout the book which the author clearly can't spend much time on because of space but which are equally fascinating in themselves, such as: - (pg 188) Morning glory has LSD-like components that have been much studied and have variable effects in mice, rabbits and humans, with some people feeling little effect and other getting a full "trip", although often an unpleasant one. - (pgs 7-8) Rhubarb was once thought to be an aphrodisiac by the Romans and a cure for a form of malaria by medieval herbalists; until the mid-1500s it was only available to Europe as imported dried roots. - (pgs 69-70)

There was once a great hospital atop Soutra Hill in Scotland, south of Edinburgh, its first charter dated from 1108 (!) and it reached its epogee in 1462 and was finally closed in the 1500s, razed by the late 1800s and its drains, cesspits and middens began to be excavated in the 1980s. I could go on for pages more, but I will digress. In short, if you like history and if you like plants, you'll probably like this book.

I absolutely loved this book! Not only was it interesting and compelling reading but the book was full of incredibly obscure but very enlightening information about the usage history of the plants covered. Mr. Stuart also gave (in the majority of instances) the specific botanical names of the plants and other related species which is rare in non-scientific "History of Plants" books. The selection of illustrations was absolutely superb. The only negative that I have about this book is that Mr. Stuart frequently listed vague references to scientific "studies" that proved his points about certain plants but there was no information, footnoted or otherwise, to definitively identify these "studies". He also had a few scattered references to plants mentioned in unspecified publications. Who did these studies and who printed these stories? In a book of this nature, I expect to have facts and sources laid out a bit more thoroughly. I still gave this book FIVE STARS because it was so much fun to read. I have lots of other books with which to cross reference and confirm some of the more vague references so I wasn't particularly distressed by the oversight although, in my view, if you are going to thoroughly research and document some things, then you should thoroughly research and document everything. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!

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