

What plant life has to say about the past, present and future

Symposium to examine our relationships with plants, will feature experts from ASU Library, ASU Farm and Desert Botanical Garden

By Alyssa Arns, ASU News
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We often turn to the natural world when we need to reset, whether it's roasting coffee beans in the morning or taking a stroll amid blooming flowers while remembering that life changes like the seasons.

But what does our relationship to plants, and its dedicated study, reveal about the world around us?

"Plants are often treated simply as biological specimens rather than as living things that humans cultivate, consume, exchange, name and give meaning to," Arizona State University Professor [Julia Sarreal](#) says.

A faculty member in the School of Humanities, Arts and Cultural Studies, Sarreal first became interested in food systems when she was a Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay and [encountered yerba mate for the first time](#).

"Everybody drank it in Paraguay, and every day. I had never heard of it prior, so that was really fascinating to me, for something to be ubiquitous in a country and everybody knows it, everybody uses it all the time, and then to be totally unaware of it in the United States."

Her interest became the subject matter of [her second book](#), detailing the history of yerba mate and drawing correlations between the beverage and the people consuming it — simultaneously demonstrating the impact of plant humanities.

While conducting research, Sarreal met Professor Seth Garfield at the University of Texas at Austin, who had written a book on guaraná, a caffeinated beverage from Brazil. This led to a natural collaboration between the two scholars, who were both interested in collaborating on a project about plants native to the Americas.

“We certainly have excellent histories of chocolate, agave and quinoa — to name just a few prominent plants that fundamentally transformed human diets, cultural past times and regions in the Americas, not to mention the global economy.

“However, countless Native American plants of cultural, pharmacological and commercial importance await further research. What will we learn, say, from jaborandi about its ability to treat glaucoma, or the sugar substitute stevia and the super food açai regarding community wellness?”

Traditionally, scholars have favored the written records of the natural sciences. However, studying plant relationships across disciplines can reveal histories that written records alone often miss, informing our perspectives on the past, present and future.

For example, plant materials used in book pages tell us about historical bookmaking techniques and the availability of specific resources in the past. Indigenous food crops that have adapted to the arid deserts of the Southwest teach us about climate adaptation, offering solutions for tomorrow. Our relationship to chocolate, for example, can reveal insights about status and romantic relationships.

[With support from the Humanities Institute](#), Sarreal and Garfield are mobilizing this important field through an interdisciplinary closed workshop with scholars from across the country, which will open with a plant symposium, featuring three public events in collaboration with [ASU Library](#), [ASU Farm](#) and [Desert Botanical Garden](#).

Guests will have the opportunity to [attend a rare book presentation](#), enjoy a [tour of Sparky's Garden](#), and hear from Desert Botanical Garden's Wendy Hodgson in a [keynote speech about food deserts and desert flora](#).

Growing ideas at the Humanities Institute

Sarreal's research was supported by the Humanities Institute seed grant program, which funds humanities-based projects that engage with social challenges in the past, present or future. Seed grant applications are open through Oct. 20. Eligible candidates may [apply online](#).

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU Professor Julia Sarreal studies plant relationships across disciplines to inform our perspectives on the past, present and future. Courtesy image