

Overcome 'plant blindness' with botanical awakening



Natasha Roberts
Guest columnist

If you take a moment to consider the plants in your yard at home, are you able to picture or name them? Also consider: are you regularly engaged in either growing or appreciating plants? If you answered "no" to either of these questions, you may have fallen prey to "plant blindness."

This term refers to the tendency of people in modern culture to be unaware of the plant varieties surrounding them because they don't realize how fundamentally necessary plants are for human survival. They may also not have the knowledge to be able to properly appreciate the uniqueness of each plant type, which leads them to consider plants as simply "the backdrop of animal life."

Originally, it was believed that this issue stemmed from the omission of plant science topics from biology courses. Although this certainly contributes to the problem, the main reason humanity has developed this issue is because of visual signals.

People consciously perceive very little of what visual information is taken in through their eyes. Therefore, priority is placed on visual cues that are relevant to what we are paying attention to or are important to us. This is why we tend to not be able to construct mental pictures of things we see every day, such as the features of a penny or the types of flowers that line our front porches.

Within the Spring 2001 issue of the Plant Science Bulletin published by the Botanical Society of America, James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler list five visual principles that may cause plant blindness. They are as follows:

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Wildflowers near Live Oak, Florida. TYLER JONES, UF/IFAS

Plants

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People tend to know more about animals than plants. This is the case because very few people are involved in farming crops, and educational and cultural experiences with plants are rare. This leads to a low level of meaning being tied to plants.

It is difficult for the human eye to distinguish between different kinds of plants when they are not in bloom (or the blooms are inconspicuous). Plants tend to all blend together visually when they don't have any major distinguishing features, so people are not aware of any differences.

Plants of the same variety tend to grow next to each other. This contributes to the previously listed problem: all plants looking the same. Because our eyes perceive a clump of seemingly identical and uninteresting plants, our vision will be drawn to more exciting sights such as a squirrel running up a tree.

Plants are generally viewed as non-threatening. Our continued safety and survival are not linked with plants in our minds, so we tend to label plants as not worth our attention. However, this changes if we need to be aware of a dangerous plant such as poison ivy.

The brain looks for "patterns of space, time, and color to structure visual experience." Plants are relatively unimpressive in this regard because they are tied to the ground with their roots. If we see plants growing in a strange place, such as kudzu rapidly covering a home, we become aware

of it because it is surprising and can be a cause for concern.

Now that we have considered why plant blindness exists, we must decide how to eradicate it. The best option is to ensure people are exposed to plants early on in life, and then make coming in contact with plants a priority during the rest of their lives.

For example, kids can get involved in programs such as a 4-H horticulture club at their local extension office.

Programs like this allow an appreciation for plants and their cultivation to bloom within the young, impressionable minds of kids. I was one of those kids who got to be a part of this program, and my experience has shaped the way I see the world and how my career has unfolded.

Now when I go on a hike or wander through a botanical garden, I know many of the names of the plants I see and I am familiar with them like they are old friends.

Even if you didn't have the chance to develop a relationship with plants while growing up, you can still foster it now beginning with a simple exercise: finding your "botanical sense of place." To do

this, you need to look back on your childhood memories and try to see how plants were a part of it. Was there a certain tree you liked to play under?

Were there any wildflowers growing in your yard? Were there any agricultural commodities tied to the geographical location in which you grew up? Use your answers to these questions as a starting point for botanical discovery. Allow plants to become a meaningful part of your life by finding them in your memories and appreciating them in the present, so that you can step out of the fog of plant blindness.

For more information about plant blindness, check out the Botanical Society of America's Plant Science Bulletin from Spring 2001: <https://www.botany.org/bsa/psb/2001/psb47-1.pdf>.

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