Plant Poets’ Corner – Plant histories

What stories do the plants in our food, drink, medicine, clothing and furniture carry with them?

In the UK, the histories of many of our most common plant-based products are part of the history of colonialism. In this activity, we invite you to begin exploring these connections, using your own memories and associations, as well as stories we have gathered.

Explore plant history through poetry

1. Think of a plant-based product you often use, e.g. tea, coffee, bananas, cotton clothes.

Write down all the words you think of when you think of that product.

Tea – Warm, comfort, milk, no sugar, English Breakfast, Darjeeling, thermos, reward for the end of a journey, china tea-set as a wedding gift...

2. Try to imagine that product’s journey in reverse, from your home to where it grew as a plant. Note down the steps. For each step, think about the people involved. You won’t know every step. Notice the gaps. Include questions you may have.
Tea
Brewed in a mug my dad gave me
Delivered by a supermarket driver, through the lanes
Driven to a warehouse, sorted and counted
Flown to the UK
Packed in a factory by the hands of many workers (how many factories?)
Harvested by farmers in China or Kenya?

3. Consider the plant’s journey through history. How did it come to be used for this product, in this country? Start by writing some questions.
Where did it first grow?
What was it used for traditionally?
Start to find some answers, using the links in the box or do your own research. You don’t need to become an expert, just begin thinking about this history.

Tea
First grown in China
Thought to have healing properties
British East India Company
Opium wars

4. Use a repeated line to link together some of the associations, journeys and histories you have gathered, in a poem:

Example lines to start with
In this cup of tea is….
Stitched into this shirt is…
In this chest of drawers is…
Baked in this banana bread is…

A Mug of Tea
In this mug is the end of a journey, milk and breath, a bedtime story.
In this mug is a swirl of roads, a smell of tar, a heavy load.
In this mug is a farmer’s grief, a poison poppy, a stolen leaf.

We love receiving poems at Kew and will reply when we can: communitylearning@kew.org

Learn more about plant histories and colonialism.
Read: Slavery and the natural world: Commercial plants
Watch: The history of tea
Read: The history of tea: From China to India
Listen: Sugar Cane by Grace Nichols
Explore: Poetry vs Colonialism

All facts included in this resource are taken from the sources listed in the box above.
Created for Kew by poet Miriam Nash.
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