

# Royal Botanic Gardens Kew

One of only two known photographs of Mary Seacole (1805–1881), taken c.1873.

## Plant Poets' Corner – Women in Botany: Letters to the Past

Botany is the study of plants, also called plant science. It began as herbalism, the study and use of plants as medicines, and its written history stretches back to ancient texts from China, Egypt, Greece, India and Persia.

In this activity, we celebrate three women whose lives are part of the history of botany and plant medicine and invite you to consider the breadth of women's work in botany.

**Mary Seacole** (1805–1881) was a British-Jamaican nurse and healer who brought her skills in plant medicine across the world to care for soldiers in the Crimean War. She learned Caribbean traditional medicine from her mother in Jamaica and reorganised her mother's lodging house to care for patients during a yellow fever epidemic. When the British War Office refused to send her as an army nurse to Crimea during the Crimean War (1853–1856), she funded her own passage and set up 'the British Hotel' as a hospice for wounded soldiers. At the time, she was as well known for this work as Florence Nightingale – soldiers called her 'Mother Seacole'.



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**Janaki Ammal** (1897–1984) was an Indian botanist whose influential work included developing varieties of sugarcane that could be grown in India instead of imported from abroad. She also studied genetics for the UK's Royal Horticultural Society and co-authored *The Chromosome Atlas of Cultivated Plants*. She was an advocate for preserving India's native plants and protecting indigenous farming practices. This included valuing women's work as managers of family property and plants.

**Margaret Mee** (1909–1988) was a British botanical artist, and one of many women who contributed to botany by studying and recording plant species through her artistry. Mee specialised in plants from the Brazilian Amazon Rainforest and produced hundreds of paintings on the flora that grew there, with a particular interest in bromeliads and orchids. She lived in the Amazon for 30 years, working as an artist and environmental campaigner, raising awareness of the impact of large-scale mining and deforestation.

### Write a letter

Are there any particular women who come to mind when you think about botany? Perhaps someone in your family who has cared for, enjoyed or worked with plants in some way.

Now think more widely about women who work (or have worked) with plants or botany.

Choose one woman connected to plants or botany and write a letter to them. This could be someone you know or knew, someone famous or someone from history, including the women introduced above. What questions would you like to ask them? What would you like to tell them about the world today? Would you like to thank them or honour them for their work?

If you would like to share your writing with us, you can email it to [communitylearning@kew.org](mailto:communitylearning@kew.org). We love to receive writing and will reply when we can.

Created for Kew by poet Miriam Nash.

For more information on Kew, visit [kew.org](http://kew.org)

Here is an example of a letter to Mary Seacole written by Sadelyn, who has participated in Plant Poets' Corner writing activities at Kew Gardens:

Dear Miss Mary

Greetings to you.

Thank you for your tenacity and perseverance in breaking through.

Thank you for introducing Jamaica to the medicinal world. Natural not chemical.

Thank you for making known the properties of ginger, lemon grass, and aloe vera to name just a few.

Did you tell them Jamaica has the most variety of flowers, and that your medicinal doctor's bag is full of herbs and spices too?

Turmeric, soursop, sorrel,

Moringa,

Coconut, castor oil, cerasee,

Noni,

Peppermint, pimento,

Breadfruit,

As you know, there is so much more.

So again, I say,

Thank you.

Sadelyn

### Learn more about women in botany



**Read:** Women who transformed the world of plants and fungi



**Read:** 250 years of women in botany



**Read:** 'My work is what will survive': Janaki Ammal



**Listen:** Overcoming botany's hidden legacy of inequality



**Explore:** Increasing access to botanical artwork by women



**Explore:** Mary Seacole Trust