



# The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World

By Michael Pollan

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**The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World** By Michael Pollan

**The book that helped make Michael Pollan, the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Cooked* and *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, one of the most trusted food experts in America**

Every schoolchild learns about the mutually beneficial dance of honeybees and flowers: The bee collects nectar and pollen to make honey and, in the process, spreads the flowers' genes far and wide. In *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan ingeniously demonstrates how people and domesticated plants have formed a similarly reciprocal relationship. He masterfully links four fundamental human desires—sweetness, beauty, intoxication, and control—with the plants that satisfy them: the apple, the tulip, marijuana, and the potato. In telling the stories of four familiar species, Pollan illustrates how the plants have evolved to satisfy humankind's most basic yearnings. And just as we've benefited from these plants, we have also done well by them. So who is really domesticating whom?

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## The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World By Michael Pollan Bibliography

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Working in his garden one day, Michael Pollan hit pay dirt in the form of an idea: do plants, he wondered, use humans as much as we use them? While the question is not entirely original, the way Pollan examines this complex coevolution by looking at the natural world from the perspective of plants is unique. The result is a fascinating and engaging look at the true nature of domestication.

In making his point, Pollan focuses on the relationship between humans and four specific plants: apples, tulips, marijuana, and potatoes. He uses the history of John Chapman (Johnny Appleseed) to illustrate how both the apple's sweetness and its role in the production of alcoholic cider made it appealing to settlers moving west, thus greatly expanding the plant's range. He also explains how human manipulation of the plant has weakened it, so that "modern apples require more pesticide than any other food crop." The tulipomania of 17th-century Holland is a backdrop for his examination of the role the tulip's beauty played in wildly influencing human behavior to both the benefit and detriment of the plant (the markings that made the tulip so attractive to the Dutch were actually caused by a virus). His excellent discussion of the potato combines a history of the plant with a prime example of how biotechnology is changing our relationship to nature. As part of his research, Pollan visited the Monsanto company headquarters and planted some of their NewLeaf brand potatoes in his garden--seeds that had been genetically engineered to produce their own insecticide. Though they worked as advertised, he made some startling discoveries, primarily that the NewLeaf plants themselves are registered as a pesticide by the EPA and that federal law prohibits anyone from reaping more than one crop per seed packet. And in a interesting aside, he explains how a global desire for consistently perfect French fries contributes to both damaging monoculture and the genetic engineering necessary to support it.

Pollan has read widely on the subject and elegantly combines literary, historical, philosophical, and scientific references with engaging anecdotes, giving readers much to ponder while weeding their gardens. --*Shawn Carkonen*

#### From Publishers Weekly

Erudite, engaging and highly original, journalist Pollan's fascinating account of four everyday plants and their coevolution with human society challenges traditional views about humans and nature. Using the histories of apples, tulips, potatoes and cannabis to illustrate the complex, reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural world, he shows how these species have successfully exploited human desires to flourish. "It makes just as much sense to think of agriculture as something the grasses did to people as a way to conquer the trees," Pollan writes as he seamlessly weaves little-known facts, historical events and even a few amusing personal anecdotes to tell each species' story. For instance, he describes how the apple's sweetness and the appeal of hard cider enticed settlers to plant orchards throughout the American colonies, vastly expanding the plant's range. He evokes the tulip craze of 17th-century Amsterdam, where the flower's beauty led to a frenzy of speculative trading, and explores the intoxicating appeal of marijuana by talking to scientists, perusing literature and even visiting a modern marijuana garden in Amsterdam. Finally, he considers how the potato plant demonstrates man's age-old desire to control nature, leading to modern agribusiness's experiments with biotechnology. Pollan's clear, elegant style enlivens even his most scientific material, and his wide-ranging references and charming manner do much to support his basic contention that man and nature are and will always be "in this boat together."

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From Library Journal

Plants are important to us for many reasons. Pollan, an editor and contributor to Harper's and the New York Times Magazine and author of *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, muses on our complex relationships with them, using the examples of the apple, the tulip, the marijuana plant, and the potato. He weaves disparate threads from personal, scientific, literary, historical, and philosophical sources into an intriguing and somehow coherent narrative. Thus, he portrays Johnny Appleseed as an important force in adapting apple trees to a foreign climate but also a Dionysian figure purveying alcohol to settlers; tulips as ideals of beauty that brought about disaster to a Turkish sultan and Dutch investors; marijuana as a much desired drug related to a natural brain chemical that helps us forget as well as a bonanza for scientific cultivators; and the potato, a crop once vilified as un-Christian, as the cause of the Irish famine and finally an example of the dangers of modern chemical-intensive, genetically modified agriculture. These essays will appeal to those with a wide range of interests. Recommended for all types of libraries. [For more on the tulip, see Anna Pavord's *The Tulip* (LJ 3/1/99) and Mike Dash's *Tuplipomania: The Story of the World's Most Coveted Flower & the Extraordinary Passions It Aroused* (LJ 3/1/00). Ed.] Marit S. Taylor, Auraria Lib., Denver.

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