Dangerous Liaisons? When Cultivated Plants Mate with Their Wild Relatives. Norman C. Ellstrand. 2003. The John Hopkins University Press, 2715 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218-4363. 244 p, with tables and figures. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN 0-8018-7405-X.

Just pick up any newspaper over the last several years and it quickly becomes apparent that there is considerable emotional controversy surrounding genetically engineered plants. Ellstrand has written a definitive text addressing the issue. He states the controversy, defines the terminology in secular terms, presents case studies, describes the mechanics, addresses the impact, and suggests management strategies.

The text is extremely well written and very readable. In the preface he states the existing situation—the use of genetically engineered plants and consumer fears that they will adversely effect humans and the environment. The subject is systematically considered. In Part I, Foreplay, the stage is set with a case study the “long-distance romance” of the sugar beet in France. It then presents detailed, easily understood, explanations of the mechanics of hybridization and gene flow and addresses both the evolutionary consequences and the applied implications. The final section, Part II, Caught in the Act, shows how we recognize natural hybrid and answers the questions Do important crops breed with their wild relatives? and Is this natural hybridization the exception or the norm? In Part III, Dangerous Liaisons?, through case studies Ellstrand addresses the impact of gene flow of cultivated crops into the wild. Special attention is given to genetically engineered plants. The section concludes with answering whether we should manage domesticated gene flow into the wild and how.

Ellstrand has truly succeeded with his goal “to structure this book to be tractable to a broad audience.” This book belongs on everyone’s reading list. It will serve well as a text for anyone working with domestic crops from the plant breeder to the student of produce marketing. While the book doesn’t answer every question, it does indicate where we need more research and documentation. It points out that each plant species is unique and no generalizations can be made. Each crop must be addressed on an individual basis.

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