Report of the International People-Plant Symposium in Sydney, Australia, July 1998

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SUMMARY. Participants from eight countries met in Australia in July 1998 for the International People-Plant Symposium titled "Towards a New Millennium in People-Plant Relationships." There were about 75 presentations arranged under three general headings: 1) plants, cultural diversity, and environmental quality, 2) plants for human health and well-being, and 3) plant and horticultural education—community and schools. The symposium represented another step in the dissemination of information and awareness on people-plant relationships.

More than 150 participants, including horticulturists, environmental biologists, horticultural therapists, other health professionals and communicators from eight countries, met 19–22 July 1998 at the University of Technology, Sydney, for the International People-Plant Symposium. The theme of the symposium, "Towards a New Millennium in People-Plant Relationships," was chosen to enable an assessment of current developments in research, professional practice, public awareness and education concerning the value of plants to the quality of human life. This was the first symposium of its kind to be held outside of the USA, where biennial meetings were initiated in 1990, when the People-Plant Council was established.

Everyone is familiar with, indeed takes for granted, aspects of the essential role of plants in human existence: supplying food, fodder, fabric, fuel and shelter; producing the oxygen we breathe; absorbing the carbon dioxide we and other living things produce (including our use of fossil fuels).

Symposium Convenor, University of Technology, Sydney, Westbourne St., Gore Hill, NSW 2065, Australia.

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What is much less well known is that research is now showing that we also need to have plants around us, in our immediate and more extended environments, for the restoration and maintenance of our physical and mental well-being.

Participants were offered presentations from some 15 invited keynote speakers, as well as about 60 contributed oral and poster papers (Burchett et al., 1999). The contributions included a wide range of reviews, case studies and research findings. Sessions were arranged under three general headings to try and capture the breadth of the field; they were 1) plants, cultural diversity, and environmental quality, 2) plants for human health and well-being, and 3) plant and horticultural education—community and schools. However, there is so much overlap and intertwining of elements in this field, that some contributions could have been included in two or all of the sections!

Some papers described traditional uses of plants in Japan and Korea, comparing them with occidental practice. Others considered permaculture and food uses of plants by people in southeast Asia and Australia. Migrant gardens, both private and community-based, in the United States and Australia, were considered as reflections of previous cultures and moves towards a greater feeling of home in a new land. A number of case studies were presented of gardens designed for disabled users and of the value of horticultural

therapy in a variety of situations for recovery from illness and restoration of emotional balance. Also discussed was a range of school and community garden programs, from budding gardeners in the suburbs to special programs for at-risk youth. Experimental studies on the effects of plants on physiological and psychological responses were explained, as were the uses of plants and horticulture in improving environmental quality and ecological restoration.

United Nations' estimates show that urbanization is increasing even more rapidly than total global population. This means more people in high-rise offices and apartment blocks. Fewer of us will have wooded retreats readily available to us. We must learn to recognize more clearly the plant deprivation we experience in these circumstances. We need to respond at individual and social levels to redress the balance, with both outdoor and indoor plantings, for their calming and restorative influence on human physiology and psyche. The symposium represented another step in the dissemination of information and awareness on people-plant relationships, much needed in the new millennium on an ever more urbanized planet.

Literature cited

Burchett, M., J. Tarran, and R. Wood (ed.). 1999. Towards a new millennium in people-plant relationships. Univ. Technol., Sydney.