

# 'Planthropology' is his passion

In the world of true gardeners and garden writers, too, it's an event when a Ken Druse book comes out. It helps that he's both a photographer and a writer — he doesn't just give you the picture, he also gives you the thousand words.

It's the way he does it that matters most to me. Ken conveys passion in both mediums. Lots of self-described garden communicators — as they call themselves these days — can tell you which end of the tulip bulb goes up when you plant it, but they can't



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convey the glory of the blooms that breathe life into the waking earth of spring. Or maybe they're afraid to try. (By the way, it's the pointy end.)

I think gardening is an act of love, and so Ken is a man after my own mantra. Listen, this is a guy who once petted bumblebees as they slept among the flowers on his rooftop garden and isn't afraid to admit it. As a kid in Plainfield, N.J., he could spend half an hour looking at an acorn and once rescued a sapling from the gutter and grew it. As a writer-photographer, he wages a one-man crusade for the love of plants. Which is eloquently the case in his 17th and newly published book, "Planthropology" (\$50, Clarkson Potter).

If you've never heard the word "planthropology," it's nothing to burst your seed pods about. It didn't exist until Ken invented it. When he told me about it during a meeting at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden this summer, I wondered how it would fly. For a while, so did he.

"It seemed to me like that's what I was doing," Ken said last week during a phone interview, "the anthropology of plants. So I put 'Pl' in front of the word. Planthropology. I even Googled it and was shocked that the word didn't exist. The marketing people said no one would remember it. The sales people said no one would be able to pronounce it. But no one came up with anything better."

The book, subtitled "The Myths, Mysteries and Miracles of My Garden Favorites," was

four years in the making and shines with 450 photographs, all but a few by Ken. From the stunning cover shot of a bread seed poppy called Drama

Queen to the image of golden ginkgo leaves floating on a pond, the photos are works of art. They reveal

the intricacies of a cup-and-saucer vine and the boldness of a Jack-in-the-pulpit; they illuminate the resplendence of a pure white magnolia and the life force of an ancient bristlecone pine tree. The photographs go a long way toward curing what the author calls "plant blindness" — an all-too-pervasive tendency to disregard and disrespect the wondrous diversity of plant life. He uses his photographs to inspire and enlighten — to show how the markings on iris petals direct bees to the blossom's nectary and to explain how the intricate arrangement of a sunflower's seed head corresponds to the famous Fibonacci ratio of 1 to 1.618 also found in the perfect proportion of the human body and the spiral of the Milky Way.

For the reader, "Planthropology" is a compendium of constant discovery. On one page you learn that when citrus fruit became scarce in Great Britain during World War II, children showed signs of scurvy. The government saved the day by collecting 40 tons of dog rose hips and cooking them into a vitamin C-rich syrup. Several pages later, I learned that before she did herself in with an asp, Cleopatra considered using poison from the Strychnos tree but decided against it because the strychnine would have caused convulsions and distorted her facial beauty. Now, that's vanity.

Thanks to Ken, I know ants help germinate cyclamens and tiny wasps pollinate fig trees. Figs, by the way, are their own flowers — sort of inside-out with the sex organs on the inside. Ken covers pushing zones and pruning and starting trees from seeds, and he describes the hybridizing breakthrough that blessed us with orange purple coneflowers. He tells us about his own adventures hybridizing hellebores and day lilies — he does most of his gardening on an island in New Jersey, where he hosts a weekly radio show and podcast called Real Dirt that you can catch on his Web site, kendruse.com.



THE CROWN PUBLISHING GROUP PHOTOS

Garden expert Ken Druse approaches his photos as works of art.

And he reminds us in terms anyone can remember that if you want fruit on your winter berry holly you must have a stud in the mix. "If you grow fruitful Scarlet O'Hara you better have a handsome Rhett Butler ready and waiting."

And he revels in stories of plant explorers whose botanical adventures sometimes led to dire fates like being burned at the stake or eaten by cannibals. My own favorite was Scotsman David Douglas — best remembered for the fir that bears his name. By the age of 35, Douglas had already been forced to swim naked across an icy river and had come close to blindness during a hailstorm. His fatal move occurred when he tumbled into a pit in Hawaii already occupied by a wild bullock. He was trampled and gored, but other wounds aroused suspicions of foul play — possibly committed by his ex-convict guide.

And the story of Philipp Franz Balthasar von Siebold — think of *Hosta sieboldiana* or *Primula sieboldii* — who voyaged to Japan in the early 19th century to discover new plants and fell in love with a beautiful maiden named O-taki-san. The Japanese would not allow them to marry, so to live with her beloved she registered as a prostitute. But von Siebold was later arrested on charges of possession of a secret map of Japan. And given a

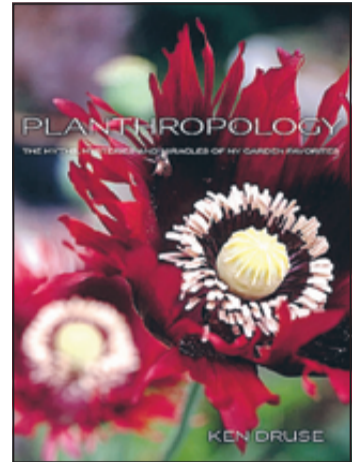
choice — take his plants and leave the country without O-taki-san and their young daughter or be executed. He opted for life and took 1,200 plants with him.

"The story of von Siebold was like a Puccini opera," Ken told me. "I love his story, but I have a feeling he was a creep. So maybe the story of Douglas is my favorite. Poor Douglas. I had to trim down the murder mystery part of his story. So I don't know which adventure story is my favorite. It's like plants — today it's Douglas; yesterday it was von Siebold."

Ken was speaking my language. "Plants are living, breathing creatures. You get it," he said. "A garden is a way of life, a way of seeing the world. In this book, I wanted to say this is how I see plants, this is how I see gardens. I can't know enough, I can't get close enough, every little thing is amazing to me."

It's always nice visiting with a gardening friend. If you pick up Ken's book, you'll have that pleasure, too.

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Author Druse coined a word for his new book.

## Others for your gift list

**Extraordinary Leaves** (Firefly Books, \$45): A celebration of foliage in its many forms. With photographs by Stephen Green-Armytage and text by Dennis Schrader, whose Landcraft Environments in Mattituck specializes in unusual tropics.

**Stylish Sheds and Elegant Hideaways** (Clarkson Potter, \$30): Author Debra Prinzing and photographer William Wright showcase 28 sheds from Southampton to Seattle. From clematis-covered potting sheds to writers' retreats, these structures enhance lifestyles and landscapes. **Fruit: Edible, Inedible, Incredible** (Firefly Books, \$60): An exploration of fruit via images captured by scanning electron microscopes that reveal the architecture and interiors of everything from pineapples to scarlet pimpernel. By visual artist Bob Kessler and seed morphologist Wolfgang Stuppy.

**The Heirloom Tomato** (Bloomsbury USA, \$35): What she did for squash and melons, Amy Goldman now does for tomatoes.

**The Gardens of Russell Page** (Frances Lincoln, \$65): A new edition of the award-winning book by Marina Schinz and Gabrielle van Zuylen that is a love song to the renowned designer who died in 1985.

### Coming Friday

In Your LI Home, Garden Detective IDs houseplants toxic to pets.

