



# Human Flower Project

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## St. Michael's Garden: Turn the Pages

There's a link between literature and botany, and two professors at a Vermont college are bearing that out.

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*Harry Potter book and a remembrance of Aunt Petunia Books in Bloom, St. Michael's College, Burlington, VT*  
Photo: [St. Michael's College](#)

The people most attuned to flowers tend to be book people, too. Why is that? Our hero Jack Goody, the late anthropologist of Cambridge, offered proof but never really ventured an explanation. He wrote that the civilizations that developed early writing systems, elaborate ones—China and India—also cultivated the richest floral traditions.

"The appearance of flowers is linked, strongly but not exclusively," Goody found, "to the use of the brush or pen on flat, portable media such as paper, hide, cotton and canvas, and to the motor skills associated with writing." ([The Culture of Flowers](#), p. 20)

At St. Michael's College, Burlington, Vermont, two professors have demonstrated this affinity—literally, and literarily. Education professor Valerie Bang-Jensen, biologist Mark Lubkowitz, and their students have constructed "Books in Bloom," a living botanical library of children's literature.

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*Students of botany and children's literature explore the Books in Bloom garden at St. Michael's College*  
 Photo: [Burlington Free Press](#)

Each plant has earned its place in this garden; each "represents a botanical character in a children's book. The lupine is from 'Miss Rumphius,' the poppies are from 'The Wizard of Oz,' the blueberry plants from 'Blueberries for Sal.'" If you're in the vicinity, there's a public tour of the garden today.

Eyore's favorite snack, thistles, are here ([Echinops ritro](#)). Harry Potter fans will spot flowers in homage to Aunt Petunia and a privet hedge (Harry lives on Privet Drive.) Visiting the garden turns into a kind of treasure hunt, back through the poems and stories of childhood.

One of several "Teaching Gardens" on campus, Books in Bloom was designed for "trans-disciplinary learning." [Sally Pollak interviewed the profs](#) and their students for the Burlington paper. "Are we preparing people to go out and solve complex problems if they've never had to approach a problem — or a topic — from a different focus?" Lubkowitz inquired.



*Outdoor classroom at St. Michael's College: education students think botanically about children's literature*  
 Photo: [Burlington Free Press](#)

Working in collaboration, students really do ask new questions: "What botanical role or even biological concepts are conveyed by the plants in a certain book? Is there a

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certain scientific leeway taken in the name of narrative? And, from a literary view, what is the flower's role in the story; what is the significance of the seeds and flowers?" (Another amazing example of interdisciplinary study with plants is [Marcia Eames-Sheavley class in art and horticulture](#) at Cornell.) All Jack Goody's work suggests that this "dual perspective" – of botany and literature, language and flowers – is not a new idea at all, but very old, something we were born with. Writing and plants flourish together, may even grow from the same rhizome. It's the academic categories that make us one-eyed, literary or science Cyclopes.

Books in Bloom is still in its early years at the college. Bang-Jensen and Lubkowitz say that with each semester, students discover new plant references in literature and add them to the garden.

If a serious beanstalk isn't growing there already, it's time to plant one.

Posted by [Julie](#) on 09/20 at 11:57 AM

### Comments

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Very interesting topic. Appreciation for books and appreciation for flowers are both cultural traditions that can only arise when a civilization has raised itself above subsistence level and has gained, for at least a portion of its population, the resources to support some kind of leisure activity. Subsistence cultures, which also tend to be nonwriters and nonreaders, either because their cultures have no tradition of literacy or because literacy is reserved for an elite population within the culture, show mainly an interest in plants for what they can DO for people rather than for their own sakes. Preliterate cultures mainly show an interest in plants as (1) edibles or precursors of edible crops; (2) healing agents, i.e., medicinals; and (3) ritual and spiritual agents. It's not that such cultures lacked a developed aesthetic; it's that their aesthetic interests seemed to focus more on animals and human beings than on flowers. One great source for examining transglobal cultural attitudes towards flowers is Jack Goody's THE CULTURE OF FLOWERS, published by Cambridge University Press in 1993 (hardback ISBN 0 521 41441 5; paperback ISBN 0 521 42484 4).

Posted by [Dianthusman](#) on 10/01 at 10:26 PM

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