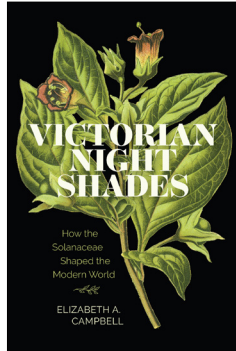


BOTANY

Victorian Nightshades: How the Solanaceae Shaped the Modern World

By Elizabeth A. Campbell. 2025. University of Virginia Press. 366 pages, 162.95 CAD, Hardcover, 53.95 CAD, Paper, 43.99 CAD, E-book.

This book takes a different approach to a group of organisms compared with many of the books reviewed here. The author, Elizabeth Campbell, looks at the history of our association with the Solanaceae (nightshades), often describing artwork or quoting literature, some works being hundreds of years old (i.e., the *Masque of Queens*



performance by Ben Jonson from 1609; p. 135). The book does not cover much, or any (depending on the species), natural history of the wild forms of these plants, so it may be a welcome palate cleanser.

Most of the first half of the book is devoted to Bittersweet Nightshade (*Solanum dulcamara*) and to a lesser extent Deadly Nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*). The richly quoted works include nonfiction, such as medical tomes and journals, as well as fictional works such as *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* (Chapman & Hall, 1859). We learn that there is little middle ground in people's opinions of these plants, for example:

This plant, being of so deadly Quality, should be extirpated wherever it grows wild, before the Berries are ripe, to prevent the dangerous Effects which may happen by their being eat (*sic*). (p. 78)

Or, more positively:

It promotes the functions of the skin, liver, and kidney as one of your young men can tell you from personal experience; and your fair readers who want to be fairer may like to know, it makes a cosmetic potion better than anything

advertised, to remove tan, pimples, freckles, discolorations, bubukles ... and flames of fire. (p. 78)

The final chapters of the book begin with The Triumph of the Potato (Chapter 6) and a nod to Charles Darwin, who noted the irony that a plant of such outstanding value existed taxonomically among the Old World nightshades, of which almost all have poor reputations (p. 148). The potato's South American origins are mentioned, which it shares with closely related species whose flesh did not make it to peoples' pantries despite the attempts at cross-breeding many of them to produce a superior table product.

Tobacco is the subject of the penultimate chapter of the book. "In terms of sheer lives taken, tobacco is considered the most dangerous plant in the world" (p. 194). Ironically, it came to the Old World as a medicine (piggybacking on its dominant use in the New World, as well as its use as a recreational drug). Given the thoroughness of the earlier parts of the book, I thought Campbell could have elaborated on the different modes of enjoying tobacco, i.e., via snuff, as a chewed substance, or by smoking it.

The book concludes with the chapter Back to the Garden: Petunias, Peppers, Eggplants, and Tomatoes. Tomatoes and petunias are each given ample space, while eggplants receive barely any. However, what is there is eloquently written, and Campbell describes our up-and-down relationship with the tomato concluding with its adoption in our kitchens.

This book is a fascinating read both for the unique perspective and the depth of coverage given to this family of plants.

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