



A Garden of Marvels

By Ruth Kassinger
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Questions for Discussion

1. The author was inspired to understand the basic biology of plants because her favorite kumquat tree died. Many people have emotional connections to their plants. What plants have meant something special to you?
2. The author traveled across the country, meeting people who are enthusiasts of or experts on particular species, from pumpkins to petunias. Which individuals come most alive for you? What is it about the author's descriptions that make them vivid?
3. Although the book is not primarily a memoir, readers get a sense of who Ruth Kassinger is as a person. How does she do that? How would you characterize the author? Does knowing the author's personal history affect how you read her non-fiction book?
4. The author wanted to learn the basics of botany, but not by studying a textbook. She wanted to take "the primrose path" to understanding. The unstated purpose of the book is to convey that understanding to readers. Do you feel she succeeds? Are there facts that startled you?
5. What do you think about this "primrose path" method of learning? What worked best for you: learning by following the first botanists as they discovered the basics of plant physiology or learning from the modern experts Kassinger visited?
6. The author points out that most school systems do not teach the basics of plant biology any more. Recalling your own science education and your life experience, what do you think about the importance of teaching basic botany? Are there any science classes you would have exchanged for one on botany?
7. The author recounts her children's experiences with science fairs and "invention conventions." What do you think of these popular elements of school curricula? Are they meaningful? Can they be improved?
8. Europeans in the 17th and 18th centuries were reluctant to see that flowers are all about sex. The author's friend, Amy, didn't want anthuriums (with their penis-like blooms) at her wedding. In modern cultures is there still a reluctance to come to grips with the fact that flowers are sexual organs?
9. The author writes about scientists who are using genetic engineering techniques to modify cyanobacteria (also called blue-green algae) so that they excrete ethanol, gasoline, and other fuels. If they are successful, algae oil would be a less polluting alternative to burning fossil fuels. What do you think about genetic engineering in general and in this context?
10. The author believes knowing more about the way plants work will make her a better gardener. Having read the book, is there information you now have that will change how you care for plants?