Making Eden: How Plants Transformed a Barren Planet

David Beerling
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Making Eden is a sweeping history of plant evolution that demonstrates both the development and fragility of plant life.

Natural sciences professor David Beerling's book is a comprehensive evolutionary history that traces the birth and maturity of this planet's plants. Sound and alluring, it exposes readers to phenomena like the remarkable complexity of plants, the genetic commonality that enables an incredible variety of flowers, and the fascinating biological secret behind the resilience of redwood trees that flourish despite their immense size.

One of the book's key focuses is the interrelationship of plants and animals. "Our brains are wired to notice animals, not plants," Beerling writes, yet plant life is "a prerequisite for sustaining a consumer society of land-dwelling animals." He makes a strong case that plants "paved the way for the evolution of terrestrial animals, and ultimately led to the appearance of human beings." Plants were, are, and will continue to be essential to the well-being of human beings, says Beerling.

The text also addresses the negative impact that humans have on plants and the Earth in general. Growing populations and increased agricultural production have imperiled the Earth to the extent that plant species are likely to risk extinction, albeit slow extinction. This reality, in combination with climate change, suggests the need for fundamental change.

One cannot help but be humbled by the sophistication and abundance of nature and plant life promulgated on Earth. That story unfolds with beauty in Making Eden. While David Beerling is cautiously optimistic, he also argues that we must "reject the grim alternative future of sending our emerald planet back to the drab world of the distant past."

BARRY SILVERSTEIN (May/June 2019)

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