

Plants in the Civil War: A Botanical History

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Review

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Sumner, Judith. *Plants in the Civil War: A Botanical History*. McFarland & Company, 2022. PAPER. \$39.95. ISBN 9781476691312 pp. 201.

On occasion, there are historical topics so obvious in their significance that they remain overlooked for far too long. Such is the case of the role of plants during the American Civil War, and, fortunately, we have a remedy in Judith Sumner's *Plants in the Civil War: A Botanical History*. Sumner, an experienced botanist specializing in ethnobotany—the study of human social interaction with plants—has followed on her past success with *Plants Go to War: A Botanical History of World War II* to present a “plant-centered history of the Civil War.” As she notes, such a study is pertinent given the war's origin in a slave society centered around a few key plants: cotton, tobacco, sugarcane, and rice. Accordingly, Sumner begins her study with an analysis of the “botanical roots of slavery,” progressing through the role plants played in southern plantation agriculture and then on to how they touched almost every aspect of southern life. Though there is some coverage of northern practices, the book could more accurately be called “Plants in the Confederacy,” given its focus on the southern states, but this quibble does little to diminish its worth to students of nineteenth-century America, slavery, agriculture, the environment, social history, and material culture. Sumner has conducted a highly original analysis of the many ways plants touched the lives of southerners—White and Black—from how people worked, ate, built, and enjoyed life, as well as to how plants operated in a slave society at war.

To assess the value of Sumner's contribution, it is worth analyzing her sources. Sumner relies almost entirely on a rich body of primary sources to recreate the southern botanical

experience. Travel accounts (such as Frederick Law Olmsted's famous tour), agricultural journals, horticultural and medicinal texts, and botanical treatises form the backbone of her account and are used effectively. This quality makes her work helpful as a reference text for both botanical conditions and source material. Admirable, also, is her use of the *American Slave Interviews* from the WPA's Federal Writers Project of the 1930s. Acknowledging their limitations, Sumner rightly stresses their importance as being one of the few direct sources for learning the role plants played in slave life. Consequently, *Plants in the Civil War* is also a fine example of the extensive use to which recently digitized sources can be put.

Sumner's engagement with secondary sources, however, is much weaker. While Sumner cites a few classics like M. E. Massey's *Ersatz in the Confederacy* and P. W. Gates' *Agriculture and the Civil War*, and some much newer specialized articles of botanical or economic focus, she does so only sporadically. This tendency can leave the reader uncertain about the source of some information. One such example is when northern primary sources, like A. J. Downing or J. A. Warder, are quoted for landscaping conditions in the South (when they were not speaking of the South in original context) without direct supporting evidence from southern sources or secondary material to tie general observations to specific locations. I may believe Sumner when she expounds on Ginko trees in the South, but I cannot determine how she knows they were actually there at the time. This pattern of relying on anecdotal citations and Sumner's own personal credibility diminishes the book's overall authority and completeness even while it is clear the author knows her substantive material. Then again, this discrepancy may simply come down to a difference between ethnobotanical and professional historical style. Nevertheless, Sumner's approach makes the book useful for quick reference on discrete topics and in forming a general

picture of plant uses during the Civil War era, while her unique perspective as a botanist shines through in many helpful technical digressions.

Though Sumner covers everything from slavery to gardening, food, medicine, clothing, lumber, and soil nutrients, I will restrict my remarks to a few representative examples. The chapter, “Agriculture and Crops” provides a prime illustration of the book’s strengths and limitations. Sumner offers a concise yet comprehensive survey of agricultural conditions before and during the war, ranging from crops grown, methods used, fertilizer experiments, and wartime shortages. Her account centers on the testimony of farm journals from the period, such as the *Southern Cultivator* and the northern *Country Gentleman*. She balances didactic detail with illustrative quotation gracefully and effectively. Yet, again, the reader is left at a loss for where most of the specific secondary information comes from, which is unfortunate given the recent work done on Civil War agriculture and the antebellum agricultural press by historians like R. Douglas Hurt, Benjamin R. Cohen, and Ariel Ron.

Beyond this difficulty, however, the book’s omnivorous scope is positively delightful. Sumner’s discussion of Confederate diets (ersatz and orthodox) is engrossing; I still wonder what persimmon beer tasted like. Here, too, she does yeoman work with the WPA narratives in reconstructing botanical conditions for the enslaved. The three central chapters on food, medicine, and gardening tie together nicely, as in the example of the bottle gourd—grown by slaves as a drinking and eating vessel in their personal gardens—or in how planters kept abreast of the latest (sometimes quack) botanical solutions for the ailments of their human chattels. By utilizing a wide variety of primary sources, Sumner highlights the ways in which plants indirectly reveal the lifestyles of the people who grew, purchased, and consumed them. General historical audiences will thus likely find her middle chapters the most interesting, though true

philodendrons will even enjoy her final chapter's catalog of southern tree usage. Even with its historiographical weaknesses, *Plants in the Civil War* makes a welcome interdisciplinary addition to the growing field of Civil War era environmental history.

Logan Stagg Istre is a PhD candidate in American history at Louisiana State University. His dissertation research explores progressive agrarians and the transformation of American agriculture from the Civil War through the early twentieth century.