



P O L I
NATIONS

poems, illustrations and origin stories
of iconic plants from around the world



What is PoliNations?

The PoliNations super garden is a co-created landscape of over 5,000 plants and flowers. We feature nine of them here: their journey, their history and how they affect our lives in ways we never realised.

Why Iconic Plants?

Thousands of plants make up the botanical world, each with an extraordinary story to tell. Whether rooted in a teeming forest or urban metropolis, every plant has its own rich history, and journey of how it came to be here.

At PoliNations, you'll find nine Iconic Plants highlighted and celebrated across our site. Their stories, like ours, are diverse. These stories are reflected across our creative programme in music, text, poetry and in physical form through sculptures positioned throughout the PoliNations super garden in Victoria Square, Birmingham.

Through working with nine artists from around the world, we've brought together the vibrant, diverse illustrations within these pages to reflect the rich and varied origins of the plants we often take for granted.



*Creation myths hid
in closets you locked us in.
We grew from cruel soil*

Pansy

a plant of identity and protest

Historically, 'pansy' has been used as a derogatory term for gay men - one of several horticulturally derived slurs. Over time, the name has been reclaimed as a celebration of diversity and sexuality: throughout the 20th century numerous freethinking movements have used the term, including the drag balls of 1920s - 1930s New York, in which performers were referred to as 'pansy performers' because of their colourful clothing.

Poem by Sam J. Grudgings
Artwork by Zsófi Rumi & Árpád Szigeti, Hungary



Discard me on the road, tread me into soil, I only know how to grow

The fruit that cannot self-pollinate - a survivor by selection.

One seed away from tree, one tree away from fruit.

From a Kazakh seed to a British orchard, all sweetness and crunch

From apple trees on the Silk Road, to ciders by the canal.

Sink your eager teeth in, break that smooth surface. Taste.

There is a sweet and powerful history in each mouthful.

Travelling from the tree to the teeth, take me, I'm yours.



Apple

a journeying plant

Although a common sight in British orchards today, the apple actually originated in Kazakhstan! Like so many goods before it, the plant journeyed to the UK via the Silk Road. The apple's prevalence is even more surprising when you consider its inability to self-pollinate; since the seed of an apple won't replicate its parent, the only way to replicate an apple is to graft a new one.

Poem by Casey Bailey

Artwork by Eduardo Aravena Vicencio, Chile



To let yourself weep
like the cascade of leaves.

To wait for renewal, believing
that a bark contains cure,
that this wood can be woven
into a wicker.

To keep faith, knowing
the branches bend
but never break

Willow

a plant of pragmatism

Long seen as a symbol of sorrow due to its drooping branches, the willow also tells a story of resilience, healing and strength. One of the few trees that can be bent without breaking, willow trees are known for their association with crafts and weaving, but they also have a long history of healing. The medicinal properties of willow bark, which contains a chemical used in aspirin, have been used for centuries.

Poem by Romalyn Ante
Artwork by Ryoko Ando, Japan

GO AROUND THE WILLOWS OF TAMA RIVER

多摩川柳遊絵

多摩川柳遊絵
Ryoko Ando



Life's a stitch
Hug life
Calm Yo' Self
Live, Laugh, Loaf
Smell you later
Wake up & Smell the comfy
Don't Hate PoliNate
Gardening not Architecture

Lavender

a plant of wellbeing

Throughout history, lavender has been used to soothe, calm and alleviate stress. Highly fashionable in the Victorian era and into the 20th century, the scent can evoke strong memories among the older generations in particular. The plant itself, and the oil derived from it, has multiple uses across perfume, cooking and herbal medicine. Its healing qualities are known to have been used as far back as Ancient Egypt!

Poem by Kate Blandford & PoliNations Design Team
Artwork by Marion Bretagne, Spain



*Powerful thorns
reach red hearted petals.
Poetic perfume climbs,
perennial memories made,
love blossoms.*



Throughout history the rose has featured in literature and mythology from across the world, and has come to represent many things: love, war, purity and friendship among others. In a happy reflection of cultures coming together, it's only in hybridising with the Chinese rose, that the English Rose came to flower for as long as it does now.

Poem by Emilie Lauren Jones
Artwork by Xiao Mei, China



*The revolution will blossom
Tenderly in loving hands
They flourished in severed hands
Far from the cross.*

Amaranth

a plant of resistance and tenacity

The ultimate survivor, Amaranth was first used by Aztecs in rituals involving food created from the plant. Subsequently outlawed by the Spanish conquerors the plant became a symbol of resistance against the invaders. It survived their repression and continues to be grown across the world today.

Poem by Roy McFarlane

Artwork by Rodrigo Alarcon Suarez, Mexico



*From fern to furnace:
unwind the frail frond that
fuelled the industrial revolution*

Fern

an ancient plant

Ferns are one of the most ancient plants found across the globe and believe it or not played a vital part in the globalisation of the world as we know it! As a central ingredient in coal, which fuelled the industrial revolution, the humble fern had a key role to play in getting us to where we are today.

Poem by Isabel Galleymore
Artwork by Shakil Solanki, South Africa



*blind alchemy buried bulbs
translated flame-feathered petals to
gilt-ridden tongues; speculation burnished,
blooming*

Tulip

a plant of the economy

Originating in central Asia and Turkey, it was the introduction of the Tulip to Holland in the 17th century which subsequently caused the world's first asset bubble. During this period of so-called 'Tulip Mania', the plants became a luxury item: the price of bulbs soared until they peaked and subsequently came crashing down, leading to serious financial repercussions.

Poem by Olga Dermott-Bond
Artwork by Aafke Mertens, Netherlands



Thousands of years ago, in beautiful Yunnan,
the magic of tea-making began.

Trade opened the world's eye to China, its riches
and above all tea

China, tea's motherland, was happy to trade
as long as it met her own needs too.

As the love of tea grew across the globe,
so did East India Company's desire to own the trade.

By stealth, by war, by sneaky pursuits,
to India the magic of tea-making was carried.

Labouring in India, loved in Britain,

tea drove the industrial revolution, controlled the spread of disease.

Steeped in history is every cup of tea, no matter its name -

Tea, 茶, чай, thé, tee, お茶, چائے, شاي, चाय, चाया or çay.



a plant of empire

While a quintessentially English drink nowadays, and well known for being grown in India, tea has its roots in the history of empire. Originally found and imported solely from China, the East India Company moved to prevent a Chinese monopoly on the product by smuggling the plant, and the secrets of its cultivation, out of China and into India. Soon, tea became established as a profitable export for landowners.

Poem by Sujana Crawford

Artwork by Rumana Sayed, Scotland



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