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Between communities and molecules

Perspectives at the 150-year Jubilee of The Royal Botanical Society of The Netherlands

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This year the Royal Botanical Society of The Netherlands celebrates its 150th anniversary and, with that, it is one of the very few scientific societies to reach such a respectable age. The founders of the Society had already recognized the fundamental importance of plants in all aspects of life. Knowledge of plants, their metabolism, structure, functioning, inheritance and ecology is not only essential for curiosity and science, but also for human survival. We cannot exist without plants and therefore, as has been true for so many years, the Society represents all directions of botany and is responsible for the stimulation of research, varying from plant parts to the entire vegetation.

This celebration provides us with a splendid opportunity to look at the history of the Society and to think about its future. We will all experience this reflection as an exciting journey over the hills and through the valleys of botany during so many decades. We will also face many challenges providing us with so many perspectives in botany. The Society started with the study of the flora but, soon after its birth, plant sociology, plant systematics and taxonomy, as well as experiments in plant physiology and genetics, were incorporated.

In 1845, the founders of the Society were not botanists by profession but mainly physicians, pharmacists, lawyers, merchants and politicians, and their early objectives were to study, describe and protect plants in their natural habitats. Another aim was to publish a series on the Flora of the Netherlands.

At the end of the nineteenth century professional botanists entered the Society. However, we have to realize that without the efforts of the founders who studied plants in their leisure, mainly as a hobby, there would be no reason at all to celebrate our jubilee today. Nowadays, amateurs as well as professionals belong to the Society, and both groups thoroughly enjoy the investigation and observation of plants in their natural environment, in a greenhouse or in dishes on the laboratory bench.

The fascinating history of the Society is described in a book published to commemorate the 150-year Jubilee (Faasse 1995). This book clearly reveals how the Society seeks to promote more interaction between all disciplines in botany. Holism and reductionism are both interests of the Society and, during the past 150 years, increasing communication between the different approaches has resulted in much better mutual understanding and increased integration between the various branches of botany.

Publishing books and journals has been a thriving business since the beginning. The *Prodromus*, a description of plants incorporated into the herbarium of the Society, was published in 1850. The revised edition emerged 50 years later. Part I of this revised

version of the *Prodromus Florae Batavae* (Vuyck 1901) clearly described the value of this work, which can be considered as the precursor of the *Flora Neerlandica*. In 1860, the *Nederlandsch Kruidkundig Archief* was established and this journal was mainly devoted to publish papers on naming and description of local plant species.

The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was characterized by the struggle between two interests: those botanists who studied the flora and those who were especially interested in the functioning of plants. As a result, the Society was divided into two sections in 1904. This split was not considered to be a separation; on the contrary, it was probably the only way to prevent a rupture. A new international journal, *Recueil des Travaux Botaniques Néerlandais*, representing the second strain, was established. In contrast to the *Nederlandsch Kruidkundig Archief*, which reported on the local flora in Dutch, the new journal addressed an international audience and published papers on botany in English, German and French.

Reflecting the convergence between the two interests, in 1952 the Society decided to stop publishing two journals and to create a new one instead. From that time on, *Acta Botanica Neerlandica* has published much of the progress in botanical research and has mirrored the various branches of botany represented in the Society. It is now one of the prominent international journals on plant science.

We are proud that many internationally renowned botanists in our Society have generated overwhelming amounts of new ideas, and that these ideas are playing important roles in the development of botany. There are too many names and contributions to mention here, but all the landmarks in our history are recorded in the contributions published at the various jubilees of the Society (e.g. Sirks 1935; Stafleu *et al.* 1970; Faasse 1995).

The Society organizes many national and international congresses and symposia with the aim of bringing together researchers, teachers and all those who love or use plants. These meetings serve as panels for debating the impact of botany on our lives and for discussions on further developments. Unforgettable events are the Sixth International Botanical Congress organized by the Society at Amsterdam in 1935, and the Symposium on 'The Position of the Royal Botanical Society in the Past and in the Future', organized on the occasion of the 125-year celebration at Nijmegen in 1970. Because of the problems of wartime, no conference could be organized at the 100-year celebration in 1945, but by then the Society had been honoured with the title 'Royal' from our former Queen Wilhelmina. Furthermore, on the occasion of this anniversary, the first volume of the *Flora Neerlandica* was published (Weevers *et al.* 1948). At the 150-year Jubilee a Symposium was held at Nijmegen on 18 May 1995. The theme 'Plant and Evolution' was chosen because of the fact that evolution bridges all subdisciplines in botany, from community to molecule.

Owing to the increasing complexity of botany, the Society continues to establish different Sections. The recent emergence of the new Sections for experimental plant science and for the study of algae, indicates that we are more than ever an open-minded and vital community. Co-operation between the various Sections results in the formulation of multidisciplinary research projects, and these result in huge increases in our knowledge of plants.

At present, botanists are faced with new challenges. The molecular approach is gaining a place in plant science and therefore in the Society. Advances in biotechnology are opening up enormous possibilities for studying the mechanisms of plant life, and for understanding in more detail the position of plants in the natural world.

Because of the importance of plants in the supply of food and their indicator function in environmental changes, we will have to continue botanical research in the near and distant future. We will seek to stimulate the interaction between International Botanical Societies in order to defend our discipline the world over, and will continue to encourage young people to study botany in all its aspects.

Plants are affected and often threatened by human impact through both manipulation and changes to their environment. And so we are back at the beginning: further study of the flora is important not only to generate hypotheses for more experimental approaches, but also to serve as a basis for the protection of the few remaining natural habitats. And this is one of the main merits of our 150-year-old society.

Plants affect virtually everything we do. We will never be able to manage without botanists and, therefore, I would sincerely like to wish our Royal Botanical Society a continuing long-lasting and fruitful life.

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