

People and plants: more than just good friends

The second national symposium on people-plant relationships was held at East Rutherford, New Jersey, US, in April. In the first of a series of articles, research associate Ronald Wood, a guest speaker at the symposium, introduces some of the topics addressed.

Speakers and delegates from across the United States gathered in late April to look at the relationship between people and plants.

The second national symposium on people-plant relationships was held to foster understanding of how people's psychological, physiological and social responses to the plants in their environments can play a significant role in improved physical and mental health for individuals and communities.

Forty-five speakers presented a diverse range of papers in concurrent sessions over three days.

The symposium was sponsored by Rutgers University Co-operative Extension and The People-Plant Council and endorsed by the American Society for Horticultural Science, the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta and the American Horticultural Therapy Association.

The theme — Setting Research Priorities — focused on an improved understanding of the relationships between people and plants to develop a research agenda, as well as identifying mechanisms and methodologies by which horticulturists can work with social scientists and other professionals to more fully understand and utilise people-plant relationships.

The symposium began with an address by Charles Lewis, horticultural research fellow at The Morton Arboretum in Illinois.

Lewis is much loved, and greatly respected, for his dedication to bring-

ing the people-plant interaction message to horticulture for more than 20 years and, in fact, provided the inspiration for the people-plant national symposia.

The following three days covered plants and human culture, plants and the community, implementing research, horticultural therapy, and plants and the individual as outlined by Lewis.

A diverse range of speakers showed the importance of plants in our lives beyond the traditional food, fibre, fuel roles and developed ideas to reveal the richness of our relationship with plants.

The influence of plants on human culture can be seen in language, art and literature, performing arts and modern mass media, politics and world events.

Plants are important symbols in many celebrations and rituals: holidays, weddings and funerals.

The presence of plants and horticultural activities influence human behaviour in social groupings and communities.

Community and school gardens and neighbourhood beautification plantings bring people together in positive interaction. Increased community pride and enhancement activities follow plantings.

Gardens and landscapes influence our selection of residences, retirement communities and leisure pursuit.

People's responses may be the result of the plants' direct or indirect effects.

Researchers are concerned with physical changes in the environment produced by plants, for example by reducing air pollutants, thus indirectly affecting people in that environment.

They also report that direct effects of the presence of plants include lower blood pressure and recovery from mental fatigue.

Business and health-care facilities are being designed to take advantage of these indirect and direct effects which can influence human health and improve our well being.

Horticultural activities are being effectively used for therapy and rehabilitation. There are increasing indications of the efficacy of horticulture as a therapeutic tool for people with physical, mental and social disabilities.

Horticulture can be an important part of the treatment and training in prisons, vocational schools and substance abuse rehabilitation. Professional horticultural therapists should be included in treatment teams.

Gardening programs are popular and stimulating for senior citizens and nursing home residents.

Research on the psychological, physiological and social responses of people to plants can have application among diverse groups. We are just beginning to qualify and quantify the benefits of horticulture on human well being.

The third People-Plant Relationships symposium will be held in August 1994 in Kyoto, Japan, in conjunction with the next International Horticultural Conference.

Ronald Wood is a research associate with associate professor Margaret Burchett, at the University of Technology, Sydney, and a director of horticultural consultants, Interior Plantscape Technology. He was a guest speaker at the People-Plant symposium.