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Forgetting The Past

Michael Olson hosts
David Buchanan, Author of Taste, Memory
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What happens to people if plants forget their past?
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Santayana was thinking of people when he remarked, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” But could not the same be said of plants?
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Plants earn their intelligence through experience. When an environment heats up, plants that tolerate heat survive. This toleration is then programmed into the plants’ genes and passed to future generations, which then remember how to tolerate heat.
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(People? Not so smart! It seems each of us must first burn our fingers before the intelligence of what is too hot is fixed into our minds.)
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The intelligence of plants is fine-tuned by their environment. Corn that grows and develops in response to the environment of the Urabamba Valley in Peru, for example, will have a different set of values than corn that grows and develops in response to the environment of Virginia’s Shenendoah Valley. The Peruvian and Virginian may not even look alike when grown to maturity.
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The intelligence to grow and develop in response to a specific environment is the plant’s genetic heritage, and thus we often call plants that have this specific knowledge “heritage” plants.
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When we all lived on the land, heritage plants were very important because they enabled us to grow crops where we lived. But we have since moved into town. We now rely on the foods of industry to survive, and the plants of industry have a different kind of intelligence. For example, many varieties of corn now have the intelligence to tolerate chemical herbicides that kill all the other plants around them. As this intelligence makes it very easy to grow corn, the varieties are supplanting the heritage ones we once valued so highly.
This loss of genetic diversity leads us to ask…
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What will happen to people if plants forget their past?