

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau and botany

the salutary science

**Series:**

SVEC

**Volume:**

2012:12

**Author:**

Alexandra Cook

**Publication Date:**

2012

**ISBN:**

978-0-7294-1055-7

Universally studied for his writings on politics, philosophy, morality and education, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's interest in botany has been deemed a mere curiosity. In this radical reinterpretation Alexandra Cook demonstrates how this seemingly marginal activity shaped and was shaped by his philosophy.

Rousseau's botanical project was informed by his belief in the superiority of nature over artifice – a principle illustrated in his famous *Lettres élémentaires sur la botanique*, in which he used the 'natural method' of plant classification, a ground-breaking system which would eventually triumph over rival systems. Based on a wide range of original sources, Cook traces and re-assesses Rousseau's botanical education, the complex history of his plant collections, and his participation in scientific correspondence networks. She also reveals how his botanical writings were manipulated and misinterpreted following his death.

In this richly illustrated study, supported by inventories of his botanical library, correspondents and herbaria, Cook provides an unprecedented insight into Rousseau's study and practice of botany. Not simply an intellectual pursuit, it became part of his physical and psychological self-discipline, a precursor to today's 'environmental therapy'.

### Introduction

1. The 'remède dans le mal'

2. The chemical background

3. Helvetia mediatrix: the atmosphere of eighteenth-century Swiss science
4. Patriotism in a new key: Rousseau encounters Neuchâtel botany
5. Sex, plants and classification
6. 'Se tracer un plan à sa guise': Rousseau and the natural method
7. Modes of mediation: botanical books and binomial names
8. The herbarium as boundary object
9. A forged legacy: the strange fates of Rousseau's botanical works
10. Reading Rousseau on botany at the end of nature

Appendix 1: Rousseau's botanical sources

Appendix 2: Rousseau's botanical correspondents and contacts

Appendix 3: Rousseau's herbaria: summary table

Bibliography

Index

**\*\*Winner of the Society for the History of Natural History (SHNH)'s John Thackray Medal 2013\*\***

**\*\*Winner of the Arts Faculty Research Output Prize, 2013 (University of Hong Kong)\*\***

**Pages:**

506

**Price Sterling (£):**

75

Archives of Natural History

[Alexandra Cook] is clearly an expert on Rousseau's botanical writings, and brings her expertise to this study of Rousseau and his place in eighteenth-century botany. The work is a testament of her in-depth work on Rousseau's botany, and includes extensive appendices which provide a detailed enumeration of Rousseau's botanical sources, a list of his botanical correspondents and contacts, and summary tables of his own herbaria.

The British Journal for the History of Science

Alexandra Cook's *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and botany: the salutary science* is a major and decisive addition to the vast field of Rousseau studies and studies of eighteenth-century

botany. It shows how his dedication to botany for a significant period of his life had implications for his emotional, intellectual and social life and how he was part of larger and dynamic processes in accessing and ordering the knowledge of nature.

---