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New books

Harlan's Crops and Man: People, Plants and Their Domestication, 3rd Edition

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Third Edition

Harlan's Crops and Man

People, Plants and
Their Domestication

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WILEY

Originally published by ASA in 1976, Jack Harlan's *Crops and Man* explores the domestication and evolution of crops as guided by humanity's hand. This third edition, edited and revised by H. Thomas Stalker and Marilyn Warburton, brings the popular history of humankind's relationship with agriculture into the 21st century.

Here, *CSA News* magazine interviewed Stalker and Warburton about the book and their decision to revise it. The following has been edited for length and clarity.

CSA News: How would you sum up the book?

Warburton: I read the original book as an undergraduate, and it fascinated me: we take for granted that we have all these crops, but once upon a time, they did not *exist*. Harlan tells you who and how and when they were domesticated, and how humans directed their evolution. Harlan was really, really good. He was spot-on, even without the molecular tools we have now.

CSA News: What made you decide to revise the book, since the second edition in 1992?

Stalker: Harlan wrote this book, so you could read things and understand it and not get bogged down in scientific jargon; he kept things interesting. It's been 30 years since anything has been done with the book, and I'd been teaching Crop Plant Evolution and thought there's a lot of concepts in there that I think students need to know.

Warburton: This book has been out of print so long that any time I recommend the book to people, they can't get it anymore. And we didn't want to change the writing style because it's Harlan's stories and his voice that make the book so interesting. We wanted to update the book, in light of the molecular tools we have, but to keep Harlan's voice. He's a storyteller.

CSA News: What was the biggest challenge you faced while revising the book?

Stalker: The biggest challenge was combing through the literature to make sure that all the facts presented in the book, including species names, were correct and standardized. Also, when [Harlan] wrote this book originally, he was an expert in the Middle East and Africa. We fleshed out the chapters on Asia and the Americas—they were sparse. And we added in additional crops and corrections to things that have been studied since the 1990s. Harlan did his literature review before there were computers, and I think his last reference was from 1989 or 1990. There was a huge amount of work that's been done since then.

Warburton: And we were really trying not to make the book any longer. There's so much new information we could put in there! We just had to check so many details, and we wanted to make sure, as much as possible, that we got everything right.

Stalker: I've written more about peanuts than [the length of] this whole book. So when you summarize things in here, and boil everything down to a paragraph or two on oranges, for example, it's *really* boiled down. But it's not meant to be a complete literature review: it's an overview of agricultural origins and gene pools and the history of human domestication of crops. It gives a lot of context.

CSA News: Was it difficult to keep it in Harlan's voice?

Warburton: Actually, keeping it in his style was easier than I thought. You kind of catch the flow when you read enough of [his work]. You start channeling Harlan.

CSA News: Who do you think would benefit most from reading this book?

Warburton: Well, Tom Stalker, actually, gave me this book when I was an undergraduate, and it made me realize how interesting, how fascinating this line of work is—it really influenced what I studied after that. I've gone into the field! So I think it could be used as a recruitment tool for undergrads. I also think it's accessible for the general public, to understand the importance of wild and heirloom varieties of different crops, and how many millennia and people it took to create them. It could also be used as a form of lobbying to continue preserving the necessary collections we have in gene banks.

Stalker: I think it's a really good reference for introduction to plant breeding. I strongly believe that people need to know how crops evolved to effectively study plant breeding...and Harlan's concepts of gene pool systems are widely used in the crop breeding community.

Harlan's *Crops and Man* will be available for purchase through the Wiley online library. Visit wiley.com and type in "Crops and Man" in the search box to place an order. Use discount code "HCM35" to receive a special introductory discount of 35% until 30 Apr. 2021.

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