

Green Obsessions

A History of Houseplants and Empire

Introduction:

This project maps the origins of popular, trendy houseplants, connecting the current houseplant trends with historical plant collecting during the colonial era. Through historical research into plant collecting trends and by plotting the origins of popular houseplants on the map, it becomes clear the number of beloved plants that originate from the colonized world. Botany and Natural Science should be a part of historical conversations on how colonizing nations exploited colonized lands and people for the benefit of their homelands.



Methods and Research:

My first step in beginning my research was to plot the origins of several popular houseplants onto a map. As I plotted, I began to notice a pattern. All of these plants came from the colonized world. From here, I began digging into primary and secondary research.

Primary sources which informed my research came mainly in the form of books published during this period that happen to be available online. The bulk of this project relies on secondary sources, including modern plant care literature and historical monographs which focus on traveling natural scientists and botanists from the British Empire during mid-1800s, the peak of plant collecting.



Findings and Conclusion:

Houseplants are connected to the history of exploitation of non-Western lands and peoples by European Empires. Botanists and natural scientists allied with imperial powers to fund their exploration of the world and to ship back massive amounts of plant and animal specimens to Europe. By viewing the colonized world as “other,” botanists romanticized the colonized landscape, making plants into collectors' items and creating a market for tropical flora.

These findings are displayed as a digital exhibition using ArcGIS StoryMaps software. This digital exhibit explores how the houseplant market was made possible by colonization, imagining the glass greenhouse walls as symbolic of the lines Europeans drew between themselves and the people they colonized.

