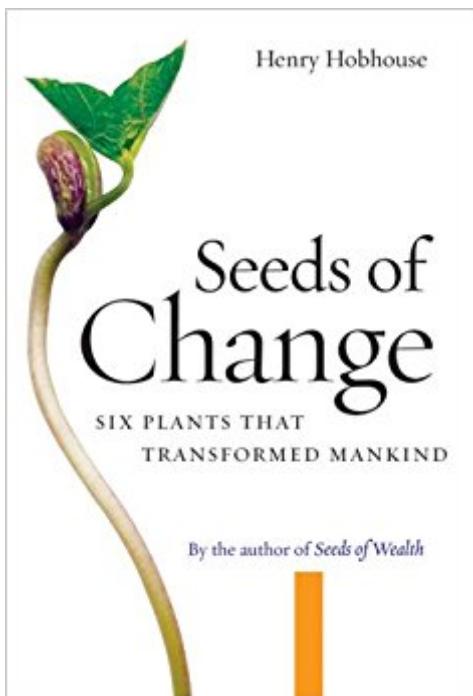


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# Seeds Of Change: Six Plants That Transformed Mankind



## **Synopsis**

A personal and highly original take on the history of six commercial plants, *Seeds of Change* illuminates how sugar, tea, cotton, the potato, quinine, and the cocoa plant have shaped our past. In this fascinating account, the impassioned Henry Hobhouse explains the consequences of these plants with attention-grabbing historical moments. While most records of history focus on human influence, Hobhouse emphasizes how plants too are a central and influential factor in the historical process. *Seeds of Change* is a captivating and invaluable addition to our understanding of modern culture.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

This book, devoted to quinine, sugar, tea, cotton, and the potato, is not just about plants but about history. It shows how certain plants influenced the course of human affairs, often negatively. Quinine, for instance, cures malaria, but that quality allowed temperate-climate peoples to exploit tropical areas. The development of cheap sugar is linked with slavery, and tea with opium. *Seeds of Change* is fascinating and well researched. (The chapter notes would have been handier as footnotes--they are too interesting to be overlooked.) Recommended. Katharine Galloway Garstka, Intergraph Corp., Huntsville, Ala. Copyright 1986 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Five plants--quinine, sugar cane, tea, cotton, and potato--have been powerful political historical

catalysts, argues this speculative journalist. "Wise and witty . . . deserves to become a classic."--Publishers Weekly --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Very interesting book. We owned this many years ago soon after it was published. It was loaned out and of course we never got it back, hence the recent purchase of this used hardback which was in very good shape. All chapters/plants are detailed, but the section on quinine is particularly informative. The updated version includes another plant--cacao--which is worth the read as well.

I'm a long-time fan of this book, and had lost track of my copy from loaning it out so I bought this updated version to read it for the 3rd or 4th time. This book makes an excellent case for the idea that certain factors that seem secondary to the course of historical events are arguably more decisive than the overt drama of politics and power. Hobhouse makes a strong case that each of these plants, their availability, and the economic and power dynamics that were shaped by their use, have more to do with the way our world looks right now than we would have thought. I'm sure arguments could be made that there are similar "hidden" dynamics that have had huge effects too, but this book stands out for me in how effectively the arguments are made.

In *Seeds of Change: Six Plants that Transformed Mankind* the author, Henry Hobhouse, puts forth his arguments for six plants, the cultivation, production, trade and utilization of which, have had a profound influence on the development of empires and economies. The book was originally printed in 1985 with a second edition in 1999 and a third edition in 2005. So, there are some cultural references that seem a bit dated in 2011. For each of the six plants about which the author chose to write, instead of starting each chapter off with a clearly defined thesis and then setting about proving it, he slowly unwinds a narrative which includes a fair bit of history, technical detail and socio-political perspective. It seems to me, that sometimes the chapters tend to wander a bit off-topic, though into some interesting digressions. Chapter one is about the *Chinchona officinalis* tree and its derivative quinine. Quinine does not cure people of malaria, but it does mitigate the symptoms so that people survive longer and are much more productive. The authors points are: the trade in quinine was one of the first valuable sources of revenue for Spain (particularly the Jesuits) from the new world, the effort to discover the important active components of *Chinchona* and their mode of action in treating the symptoms of malaria led to the discovery and synthesis of new drugs, the use of quinine allowed Spain (and later France and England) to colonize tropical and sub-tropical parts of the world with greatly reduced loss of life in the colonizers and greater

productivity from the subjugated populations. Chapter two deals with sugarcane and its extract, sugar. The author points out that the establishment of colonies in the Caribbean was to grow sugarcane for export back to England which had an unusually high per capita consumption of a foodstuff that was not necessary to the diet. In fact, the quality of health in England declined as sugar calories displaced calories from other, healthier, foods in the English diet. At the same time, the sugar trade required the labor of African slaves leading to the Africanization of the Caribbean and all the attendant problems that would follow from the dehumanizing trade of human beings. Chapter three deals with tea and, again, the insatiable English demand for it. Originally, tea was available only from China and only in trade for copper, gold or silver. The imbalance in trade led to a hemorrhaging of bullion from England to China. To stanch the flow, England decided to illegally sell opium from their colony in India to China in trade for tea. This would eventually lead to the Opium Wars and the destabilization of Chinese government and economy. Interestingly, the trade in tea also led to the large trade in porcelain wares from China to England, established the economic clout of the Indian colony as an opium and then tea producer and the opium trade established the personal fortunes of Warren Delano (Franklin Delano Roosevelt's grandfather), John Murray Forbes of Boston (financial backer of Bell Telephone), the Cabot family of Boston (and their endowment of Harvard University), Abiel Low (benefactor to Columbia University) and John Green (benefactor to Princeton University). Chapter four deals with cotton and the textile made from the plant. Because of the labor involved to harvest cotton, separate the seed from the lint and spin the fibers into thread by hand the cost of cotton textiles was higher than textiles from wool, linen or even silk. The author proposes that had the land west of the Appalachia Mountains not been so ideal for cotton growing and if Eli Whitney had not invented the mechanical cotton gin, slavery might have died out in the US. Instead, cotton became the economic driving force of the plantation south and the industrialized textile mills of the north and England. Chapter five deals with the potato and how the oppressive, ethnically motivated, policies of the English forced the Irish to subsist on marginal land where they could only grow potatoes (high in calories but poor in balanced nutrition). The author documents how the high caloric value of potatoes produced on a small plot of land allowed the Irish population to grow substantially and he points out there were several "famines" due to poor potato crops leading up to the "Great Famine" of 1846-47 which afflicted the entire country. Of course, the potato famine led to mass migration from Ireland to the United States which had a huge impact on the ethnic mÃ©lange and politics of cities such as Boston and New York. The sixth plant, coca from which cocaine is derived, was added for the 1999 edition of the book. In South America, the Incas revered coca and chewed the leaves to help them cope with the affects of living and working at

such high altitudes. Chemists refined and purified the extracts and created a drug which gave birth to a soft drink empire and has become a cornerstone in the hot political debate about how to deal with addicts and the illegal drug trade. The author presents six plants with six very unique impacts on the development of our modern society. Some might argue that coffee, rubber, maize or tobacco had an equally important impact, but these six make for a very entertaining read.

I actually read/listened to (I originally "read" it as an audiobook) nearly 20 years ago and have re-read it a half dozen times. It has more information than you could get from a half dozen History courses, but reads like a bestselling adventure novel. Go for it, I think you will love it, too.

I first read this on loan from the library when there were only FIVE plants that transformed mankind. When I saw the addition of the sixth plant I knew I had to own it. I think his premise and his style are quite fascinating. This book teaches and makes one think.

The history of quinine is totally enlightening. Who would have thought that malaria had such far reaching consequences. A great read.

Well written and truly informative.

The book includes too many of the author's opinions and too little history. For example, he indicts sugar as the cause of most of the health problems we suffer. I disagree, and wanted more information on sugar's importance in world economics and its cultivation. "Seeds of Change" was disorganized and lacks the scholarship of a Kurlansky book. I wanted to read about the history of the plants and their influence on the world. Instead, I received a mish-mosh of opinion and politics.

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