



Botanic Garden Berlin: Colonial Past, Continuities, and Perspectives

Botanical Gardens and the Colonial Past

Botanical gardens are places of beauty — spaces where people can experience the diversity of plant life with all their senses, engage in scientific research, learn, and simply relax. At first glance, they may appear detached from everyday life. Yet, botanical gardens and the sciences that explore the diversity and evolution of plants, fungi, and algae are deeply rooted in society and have developed in close connection with it.

From the 15th century onwards, European powers colonised vast regions across the globe. These conquests were driven by economic and strategic interests and ideologically justified by the belief in the "superiority" of European civilization. Like other branches of science and the humanities, botany and botanical gardens further evolved in interaction with this colonial expansion. In recent years, these connections have increasingly become the subject of academic and social debate. At the Botanic Garden Berlin, we, too, have turned our attention to this part of our history. This paper represents a first step in that reflection. We are convinced that understanding our role in history is essential for interpreting the present and shaping the future.

Global exploration and documentation of living nature developed hand in hand with European colonial expansion. Botanists participated in expeditions before, during, and after the various acts of invasion and annexation. Botanical gardens and herbaria became hubs in transnational research networks, supplied by a growing influx of plant material from around the world. They also played a role in the exploitation of plant resources and associated indigenous knowledge for commercial purposes — whether as crops or ornamental plants. Moreover, botanical gardens were instrumental in implementing the global transfer of plants, driven by the economic interests of various stakeholders.

The Botanic Garden Berlin and Its Colonial Past

The Botanic Garden Berlin was founded in 1679. Although it did not belong to a major colonial power at that time, the Garden received considerable quantities of plants, seeds, and herbarium specimens from overseas territories through international botanical networks. These materials came from botanists working abroad, including in colonies governed by other European powers. Another significant source was the exchange of plant material with other botanists, herbaria, botanical gardens, and commercial nurseries.

Under the directorship of Carl Ludwig Willdenow (1801–1812), Berlin already played an influential role within these global scientific networks. This laid the groundwork for the Botanic Garden Berlin to become one of the largest institutions of its kind in Europe, even before the founding of the German Empire in 1871 and its subsequent acquisition of colonial territories.

At the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, European powers divided the African continent among themselves. Germany emerged from this process as the colonial power with the third-largest overseas holdings. Just four years later, in 1889, a Federal Council resolution awarded the Botanic Garden Berlin the first right to receive botanical collections from all expeditions financed by the empire. In 1891, the "Botanische Centralstelle für die deutschen Kolonien" (Botanic Central Office for German Colonies) was established at the Garden.

The "Centralstelle" focused on supporting colonial plantation economies by researching tropical plants, testing crops, sending seeds and living specimens to the colonies, training gardeners for colonial service, and advising officials, merchants, missionaries, and plantation owners. The Garden also used exhibitions to raise awareness in German society about colonial botany and the economic potential of plant products from the colonies. In this way, the Garden contributed to the implementation of plantation economies in the interest of the colonial rulers.

Between 1895 and 1910, the Botanic Garden was relocated to a more spacious site in Dahlem, due to the limited expansion possibilities at its original location in Schöneberg. The new garden was conceived as a place to display "the world in a garden". Competing with renowned institutions such as [Kew Gardens](#) and [St. Petersburg](#), the Berlin Garden was intended to symbolize the imperial ambition and prestige of the German colonial power.

In addition to the "Centralstelle", the Heckmann Wentzel Foundation of the Prussian Academy of Sciences (now the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences) organised numerous research expeditions. So, within just 30 years, the Garden significantly expanded its living collections and herbarium holdings, including extensive material from the colonies. After the Treaty of Versailles sealed the end of Germany's colonial empire in 1920, the "Centralstelle" was dissolved. However, this did not mark the end of German-run plantations or the botanical research and collecting activities of German scientists in former colonies.

Between 1939 and 1943, the "Centralstelle" was briefly revived. In 1937, the Botanic Garden was commissioned by German businesses to carry out applied scientific research on plantations in British-administered parts of Cameroon. The newly re-established "Botanische Zentralstelle für die Kolonien" resumed its work in 1939, funded by private sources. Due to wartime restrictions, however, its activities were soon curtailed.

Continuities in the Postcolonial Era

Following the Second World War, colonialism began to wane as colonised nations increasingly demanded and won independence. In 1960, the United Nations issued the [Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples](#), denouncing colonialism as incompatible with fundamental human rights and the UN Charter.

Nevertheless, political and economic dominance by former colonial and new powers has persisted. "Development" was imposed based on models of economic growth. This contributed to a widening asymmetry of wealth between the Global North and South, as well as within individual societies.

In recent decades, the unchecked exploitation of natural resources has accelerated dramatically, exacerbating the global biodiversity and climate crises. Many countries in the Global South — often rich in biodiversity — are constrained by economic dependency and debt, limiting their ability to respond effectively. This also impacts their scientific institutions, which frequently operate with insufficient resources.

To address the consequences of ongoing exploitation and economic inequality, international agreements have been developed by the United Nations. The [Convention on Biological Diversity](#) (CBD), signed at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, aims to (1) conserve biodiversity, (2) ensure its sustainable use, and (3) promote the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources. The third objective especially emphasizes the sovereignty of biodiversity-rich countries and the necessity of financial and technological

support to reduce inequalities. Botanical gardens played a role in shaping the CBD and continue to be guided by its principles.

Botanic Garden Berlin Today

At the Botanic Garden Berlin, our mission is driven by a deep commitment to halting biodiversity loss and fostering a world in which the intrinsic value of nature is no longer up for debate. We adhere to the principle of [open access](#) — our research collections and scientific findings are freely available to all.

We foster international collaboration to document, study, and protect biodiversity. Our institutional partnerships also aim to build scientific capacity in the Global South, enabling them to participate in the dynamic international scientific community. In line with the sovereign rights of states, indigenous peoples, and local communities, we implement measures to ensure fair sharing of genetic resources and associated knowledge. Our living collections celebrate the beauty and diversity of the plant kingdom, inspiring a deeper connection with nature. Through educational initiatives and our Botanical Museum, we engage with the public to promote environmental awareness.

Our Perspective on Decolonisation

Against the backdrop of our history, the Berlin Botanic Garden cannot be understood solely as a living museum of global flora or a green retreat. Every greenhouse and herbarium specimen bears witness not only to botanical wonders, but also to centuries of exploitation and the uprooting and renaming of life. This compels us to ask not only 'What happened?', but also 'What now?'

We are at the beginning of a transformative path that we can only meaningfully embark upon together. The first steps on this path have been outlined and taken:

- Initiating dialogue with institutional partners to critically reflect on our modes of collaboration. This includes setting equitable frameworks for joint projects and ensuring inclusive communication of knowledge and practices to develop shared strategies for biodiversity conservation.
- Continuing our full commitment to digitization and open access of biodiversity data and scientific publications.
- Investigating the colonial contexts of botany as a discipline, and launching cooperative projects to examine the institutional structures, policies, and practices of the Botanic Garden Berlin.
- Raising public awareness of the links between colonialism and botany through exhibitions, guided tours, and educational programs in close collaboration with partners and local communities in formerly colonised countries of the Global South.