

Plant tributes and trials in the French empire, 1670-1730

Historians of natural history, including myself, have tended to explain new plant introductions in eighteenth-century European global empires as a consequence of the dominant role of metropolitan scientific institutions in acquiring and trialling rare species. But for France, at least, this centralising model only holds good for the period after 1750. Drawing upon recent archival research into plant introductions across the entire French empire in the period around 1700, I want to highlight the indispensable role of colonial administrators and the culture of curiosity in fostering the creation of botanic gardens and the introduction of useful plants. Administrators deployed plants and plant products as gifts within networks of patronage which represented the nation as Empire, and exotic natural resources as tributes to French power. An extensive regime of testing plants newly introduced to French cultivation accompanied these phenomena, responding to doubts over the stability of plant properties in the transition from colony to metropolis, from wild nature to cultivation. The backdrop for these processes was the metropolitan fashion for exotic plants as the subject of botany, medicine and horticulture. The appearance of new spaces for shopping and consuming, and the increasing commodification of scientific knowledge, afforded new opportunities for buying, growing and ingesting exotic foods and drugs. I would suggest that we can in fact understand these practices as a form of auto-experimentation by the French social elite.