It's complicated, our relationship with plants.

One moment we stop to smell the roses and the next step is straight into a nettle patch. Our green neighbors entice us with scents, colors and shapes, then turn around to sting us, stuff up our heads and bring down our power lines.

We're wild about – and wary of – plants. That makes for a rocky relationship.

But the plants pay us no mind. They bloom with abandon, showering gifts. Everything that keeps us alive and comfortable – food, fuel, fiber, medicine, lumber, the very air we breathe – comes from plants.

Green gifts also take on a less tangible shape. Oftentimes, islanders suffering with cancer will pause on the Washington Park road to hug a yew tree for luck.

After Paul Bergner retired from 30 years at the local plywood mill, he spent much of his day in the garden. Chores ended, he would relax next to a giant spruce. "Leaning against that tree is how I get my strength back," he told his son. "The tree sends me strength."

Resident plant guru Art Kermoade, who has guided botany walks on Fidalgo for years, calls plants our "connection to the cosmos."

If a deeper connection does exist, it can be hard to find when coming upon a patch of trampled wildflowers or a maple grove cleared for parking. We might ask: if we value plants, how should we behave regarding them? Are plants of value only in their usefulness to us or in and of themselves? And how do we define usefulness?

This exhibit follows a path that twists through sun and shadow. It looks at how we've used and abused the island's green world, how we've changed it to shape our needs and desires, and how we've changed along the way.

We hope you enjoy the walk.
Before cutting down a red cedar, tribal peoples would address the tree’s spirit and request its permission to be taken.

Honoring plants helped insure the continuation of their gifts. To act otherwise risked losing a vital source of food, medicine, tools, shelter, and fiber.

For early peoples, Nature was alive with spirit and story. In one legend, the skunk cabbage saved a tribe by offering its roots as food and was rewarded with an elk-skin blanket and a war club, which it holds today. Skunk cabbage roots were eaten only in desperate times but the plant’s huge leaves served as “Indian wax paper” to wrap or hold food.

Seeing a plant as savior or kindred being bred gratitude and respect. Care was taken not to over-harvest, and thanks were offered to the plants taken.

Tribes made seasonal migrations to favorite food-gathering spots, packing along cattail mat shelters and digging sticks to pry bulbs from places such as the meadows on March Point. Camas bulbs were used like potatoes in stews and soups, and wild onions added flavor.

Natives munched on fresh berries or mashed and dried them on racks for winter storage. Soapberries whipped up into a froth were sweetened with salal berries or camas to create a tasty “ice cream.”

Red alder bark made good dyes, and maple wood was easily carved into paddles and utensils. But it was the red cedar that supplied the material for canoes, rope, clothing, planks, boxes, baskets, tools and more.

According to tribal myth, the Great Spirit created the cedar to honor a man who was always helping others.

Native peoples burned meadows to perpetuate bulb harvests and selectively cut trees, but for thousands of years their actions did little to change the island landscape.

And then came those who followed a different pathway.
HEN Jeannette Summers’ family moved to Campbell Lake in 1924, “it was all trees. You had to look straight up to see the sun, my mother said.”

At one time, that was the way it looked all over Fidalgo and Guemes Islands. Sky-high forests of fir, cedar, and hemlock flourished almost to the shoreline.

It stayed that way until the arrival of people firm in the belief that trees were both an obstacle to overcome and a resource to be used. Intensive logging began in the 1870s and in 1890, huge brush heaps burned for nearly two miles along Fidalgo’s shore. One awed reporter called the scene a “lake of fire.”

Out of that inferno arose a town, and across the island farms slowly replaced forests. The wild berries and bulbs that sustained native peoples gave way to strawberries, loganberries, hops, apples, pears, and plums. Out on the point where the Swinomish harvested plants, Hiram March gained fame as the “Cauliflower King.” Others grew goldenseal and ginseng, valued for healing purposes.

Islanders ate wild plants such as mushrooms and blackberries, and used dandelion greens as a spring tonic. Juice from thimbleberry stems soothed nettle stings and the bark was stripped from cascara trees to make laxatives.

For several years, throngs traveled each May to Cypress Island to gather masses of rhododendrons but largely ignored another lovely native, the red-flowering currant. Ironically, the plant didn’t become popular until botanist David Douglas introduced it to the admiring English, who later re-introduced it to its native Northwest.

Being ignored by people had its benefits. Jeannette Summers recalled the calyposos she and her sister picked as children at Campbell Lake. “We must have pulled up the bulbs and the whole works,” she said, “because Agnes and I walked up there several years ago, looking for them. We couldn’t find a one.”
In a green Olympics, the gold medals would go to invasive species, plants tough enough to make our natives eat dust.

Invasive non-natives grow fast, spread quick, and don’t fuss about how or where. They rob native species of light, water, and pollinators, and may even produce chemicals to poison their neighbors.

Non-native plants arrived here in the mid-1800s with Europeans who transported them both purposely and accidentally. Without natural checks on their growth, the newcomers flourished.

After habitat loss, invasive species are the biggest threat to biodiversity, disrupting finely-tuned relationships that evolved over thousands of years. A butterfly, for example, may lay eggs on only one species of plant. Should that plant disappear, so will the butterfly, and so goes another thread in the tapestry of life.

On Fidalgo, non-native invasives include Scotch broom, English ivy, holly, daphne and laurel in the forests; Eurasian milfoil in local lakes; spartina in Padilla Bay; and many more.

Ivy escaped yards via the stomachs of birds and now covers the Cap Sante woods. Holly, promoted by an admirer who envisioned Anacortes a "holly city", is now the target of regular work parties. "We’ve taken out thousands of holly trees,” says volunteer whacker Herschel Janz, adding that the work has paid off. On 1400 forest acres, "we’ve severely depleted non-native plant species.”

Over at Washington Park, Ann Dursch and friends fight the spread of holly and daphne, "probably from early plantings in the developed Sunset Beach area.” Others clear local hillsides of Scotch broom, a European transplant that ejects long-lived fire-resistant seeds.

Early settlers and those who followed after didn’t realize the impacts of the plants they transported. A few, however, had the foresight to keep at least some places as natural as possible, bringing us to the next turn in our path.
If it hadn’t been for a few determined women, Washington Park’s "leaning tree" might have become the view from someone’s deck. Instead, thanks to the Anacortes Women’s Club, the iconic fir is enjoyed by countless visitors. In 1922, the ladies’ lemon pie sales preserved for the public the stretch from Sunset Beach to Green Point. Over the years, several other residents donated land to complete the 220-acre park on Fidalgo Head.

The park’s south bluff, ablaze with wildflowers in springtime, "is one of the jewels of our region," wrote biologist Eugene Kozloff. "The mix of trees, shrubs, flowers, grasses and ferns is distinctive, due partly to the presence of serpentine rocks."

The bluff’s serpentine soil supports a unique variety of plants, including pod fern and wildflowers especially adapted to the sterile soil. Glowing madrones partner grizzled seaside junipers, a new species identified in 2007. The park is also home to the gold star, a daisy-like plant that occurs in very few places in western Washington.

Louise Miner, who had a deep love for the park and its plant life, wrote that the place was "an experience, an escape...." This sentiment is echoed in the Anacortes community forest plan which notes that the "relief valve" of preserved wild areas would be "a priceless community resource in coming decades."

Many islanders agreed. Over time they donated land on Mt. Erie, around Cranberry Lake and in other spots, eventually helping to preserve 2800 acres of Fidalgo forest. In 2007, Anacortes could boast nearly 228 acres of forests or parks per 1000 people, topping a list of 60 American cities reviewed by the Trust for Public Lands.

But the road to a new relationship with the land wasn’t all flowers and sunshine. There were some major bumps to deal with along the way.
Trees down, houses up — for a century, that was the typical sequence on Fidalgo. There were exceptions in the form of preserved wild spaces but they only proved a rule that went largely unquestioned.

Until 1969. That year plans surfaced for a 620-acre development encircling Pass Lake and cutting through the forest to Deception Pass. Trees would give way to condos, a shopping center, and a motel overlooking the pass and serviced by a tram snaking along the cliff. A "Save Pass Lake" group sprung up and in 1972, the land instead became part of Deception Pass State Park.

Cut to 1977 — same story, different lake. The Dept. of Natural Resources, which managed the Heart Lake area, wanted to lease the shoreline for condos. Again Islanders reared up. The newly-formed Evergreen Islands worked with legislators to authorize funds to buy the land, and on Valentine's Day 1980, Heart Lake became a state park.

Now part of the Anacortes Community Forest Lands, the Heart Lake area holds a remnant stand of old-growth registered with the state's Natural Heritage Program. Islanders can take a jaw-dropping jaunt through massive firs, cedars and hemlocks in a place that also boasts Fidalgo's biggest tree (a Douglas fir 25 feet in circumference).

A decade after Evergreen Islands championed trees over condos, another group, Friends of the Forest, rose up to protest the practice of clear-cuts to fund forest management. Aerial photos of three 20-acre cuts near Whistle and Heart Lakes helped galvanize public opinion. After surveys showed people opposed the logging by an 89% margin, the city set up an endowment fund in 1990. If Islanders wanted the forests managed without revenue logging, they'd need to step up to the line they'd drawn in the sand and fork over some money.

Just how deep had the green connection grown? Anacortes would soon find out.
Islanders' support for the forests was no frail sprout but a sizable taproot. The endowment fund received enough donations that in 1991 Anacortes ended revenue logging. In 1998, the city adopted a conservation easement program to further protect and fund the forest. By 2007, it surpassed a $1.5 million goal eleven years ahead of schedule.

Amelia Heilman, Evergreen Islands president in 1997, said: "We’ve got to change our way of thinking. We can’t be owners of the land anymore; we must be its custodians.”

Heilman’s words have rooted and borne fruit in the many who freely give their time to keep these islands green. They guide wildflower walks, lead Forest Discovery classes, or pull invasive species and plant natives. They preserve places such as the top of Guemes Mountain, and monitor Ship Harbor to protect wetland plants. Still others write letters and speak up at public hearings. One stalwart group worked for three years to pass an ordinance that would safeguard trees during development. In 2008, Fidalgo Island was 4th in the state to be honored by the National Wildlife Federation as a backyard habitat community, with over 600 yards certified. And for ten years, Anacortes has been dubbed a Tree City U.S.A. by the National Arbor Day Foundation.

Many island plants have disappeared since the time of the first peoples. Most of the big trees are gone and the meadows have lost much of their color. Historic photos tell the story of how it once was and how we once were. One Skagit County photo from the late 1800s shows couples waltzing on the massive stump of an old-growth cedar. If today’s dance with island plants holds any triumph, it’s likely to be spurred not by a tree’s demise but by the return of a wildflower long gone or another piece of land preserved.
To learn more…

Anacortes Treekeeper Program
Provides funding to keep Anacortes’ street trees green & healthy. Contact the Anacortes Parks Dept at 360-293-1918.

Evergreen Islands
Works to ensure the environmentally sensitive development of Fidalgo Island. Visit www.evergreenislands.org.

Fidalgo Backyard Wildlife Habitat Project
Promotes the use of native plants to build habitat for local wildlife. Inquiries to PO Box 881 or call Rich Bergner at 360-299-2579.

Friends of the Forest

Friends of Washington Park
Works to educate the public about Washington Park & preserve the park’s native plant populations. Contact Bob Vaux at 360-661-3503 or Ann Dursch at 360-293-3044.

Salal Chapter, Washington Native Plant Society

Ship Harbor Interpretive Preserve

In Conclusion

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