Plants congregate and socialize, and they have long formed part of our publics. They are more than representations in human knowledge systems or world views. But knowing them is difficult and sometimes takes a lifetime. Ethnographers have long gathered and mulled over plant lore, often while partaking of them in various herbal or culinary renderings. This special issue on plant ethnography marks a shift in this contemplative listening stance, by bending closer, leaning over and studying their ways. The questions posed here are important: how do we address them? Can they thrive in the wake of habitat destruction? What can we learn from them before it’s too late?

Botanists identify and assess rare plant species in the Sonoran Desert in southern California in order to plan the collection of their seeds for long-term seed conservation at the Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Garden, a partner of the global Millennium Seed Bank Partnership (MSBP).

The Sonoran Desert has more plant diversity than any other desert in the world, with over 2,000 native plant species which have developed fine balances and beautiful adaptations to life there. These species, however, are caught between two key pressures of the Anthropocene: the prospect of a changing climate, and the encroachment on their habitat by human development, in this case – ironically – by the earmarking of vast areas of the desert as prospective solar energy facility sites.

MSBP partners, like Rancho Santa Ana BG, have conserved 13 per cent of the world’s wild plant species. The banking of plant seeds insures against their extinction and provides resources for research and reintroduction which can support their conservation, but ultimately, the deserts cannot be conserved through seeds in freezers alone.
You overlook them every day—sentient vegetative life forms in the cracks and crevices of urban worlds. Perhaps on a spring day, you passingly notice ‘trees’ or ‘flowers’ as they bloom, but see nothing of their specificity, their agency, their sociality. Yet plants provide a basis for how we think—‘roots’ and ‘branches’ structure our language and computational forms; as our thoughts ramify, they ‘sprout’ ideas that ‘stem’ in various directions. And they are the foundation upon which mammals have thrived on earth, so far. You should know more about them than you do.

Stop for a moment now and give them your attention. Consider: indigenous communities, whose medicinal plants and knowledge circulate in global marketplaces; roots and the capacity of roots and seeds to remake, regrow, and re-establish themselves in new contexts; or the roles, statuses, channels, spatial-temporal scales and ontological frames required for engaging a plant’s point of view. Ponder: taking position alongside botanists and indigenous sages to remake ethno-ontological knowledge; seed conservation as a generative experimental space from which new forms of human-plant relations might flourish; or how communicative phytochemicals differ from the signs and symbols anthropologists typically study. In this special issue we will learn how it is that we think with and through plants.

Svalbard Global Seed Vault (http://www.seedvault.no) in Longyearbyen, February 2008. The vault provides a safe backup of seeds from food crops conserved by seed banks worldwide. This picture is from the day of the official opening. The entrance to the vault is well guarded from visiting polar bears. During the opening, the vault was guarded by an armed guard and an ice sculpture of a polar bear.