

## Summary Report Planting Stories: Seeds of Diaspora

### Introduction

The streets of New York City (NYC) are alive with plants from around the world, each carrying its own history. These histories are most salient within immigrant communities. While historically many communities have relied on plants for cultural preservation, traditions such as foraging and gardening often fade as younger generations strive to assimilate.

*The Columbia World Projects (CWP) Planting Stories: Seeds of Diaspora* was an interdisciplinary educational initiative that brought together sustainability, cultural studies, and creative writing Columbia University faculty and students to design and implement a unique after-school elective at the Columbia Secondary School (CSS) in the Morningside Heights neighborhood of New York City (NYC). From December 2022 through January 2025, this CWP-supported project connected CSS students with Columbia graduate student artist-teachers, environmental experts, and institutions like the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) to explore how plants embody cultural narratives. Over the course of two years, 140 students participated in the project, which developed experiential learning lessons that encouraged them to reflect on their heritage, build empathy, and enhance their observational and writing skills.

The Planting Stories project aimed to create and implement a curriculum with high school youth in New York City to enhance their scientific, creative, and cultural knowledge and skills pertaining to plants. The intended impact of the project was to equip 9th-12th grade CSS students with the tools and knowledge to better understand and share their familial and cultural histories and identities, while facilitating cross-cultural and cross-generational transfer of knowledge and practices.

#### Diversity in New York City

- 1250 spontaneous plant species
- 2179 total plant species
- Around 800 language spoken

#### Columbia Secondary School

- 44% free lunch eligible
- 36% Hispanic
- 21% Black
- 11% Asian
- 27% White
- 5% two or more races



Biodiversity Map of NYC, Elmquist et al.  
[https://rml.sprng.com/chapter/10/1007/978-94-007-7088-1\\_19/figures/1](https://rml.sprng.com/chapter/10/1007/978-94-007-7088-1_19/figures/1)  
School statistics  
[https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/ipedssearch/school\\_detail.asp?Search=1&DistrictID=3600](https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/data/ipedssearch/school_detail.asp?Search=1&DistrictID=3600)  
0816D-3600B103944 Accessed Dec. 9, 2024

### Methods

**Curriculum development and teacher mentorship:** Working in partnership with Columbia Artist/Teachers (CA/T), an institution within the School of the Arts that matches graduate students to opportunities to teach in non-traditional contexts and with underserved communities, and Columbia oral history interns, the team co-created a curriculum that blended writing with plant-based learning. The co-creation approach actively engaged students in the curriculum development process to enhance cultural relevance and incorporate diverse lived experiences. The 16-module curriculum was designed to help students understand how the plants they encounter daily carry complex cultural significance and stories.

**After school sessions at CSS:** The project team led sessions with the CSS “Green Team” after-school elective to explore a different plant, fruit, botanical, or herb in each lesson. For each of the 16 sessions, the team developed a lesson plan and worksheet for a specific plant—apples, citrus, dandelions, cacao, garlic mustard—that invited students to learn through sensory observation (tasting, smelling, touching), cultural analysis, and creative storytelling. Students explored the history of human-plant relationships through a variety of activities, including extracting vocabulary from historical texts, creating blackout poetry, analyzing maps of colonial trade, responding to paintings and photographs, and conducting interviews with family members. Their work resulted in a diverse collection of writing that wove together personal histories, family traditions, and wider ecological narratives. The curriculum encouraged cross-cultural discovery, for instance, students compared different names for the same plant (e.g., Japanese shiso is Mexican parilla), fostering an appreciation for shared and diverse traditions.

### Sample Lessons

**MORNINGSIDESIDE PARK Dandelion Field Trip**  
 Report and/or Lesson Plan

Although they originated on the Eurasian continental mass, dandelions are now prevalent on every continent except Antarctica. Their roots are used for beer and digestion cures in traditional Chinese, Native American, and European practices. Their leaves are eaten as greens and added to salads as diverse as Norwegian and Lebanese. When yellow, the flowers can be made into wine and liquor. When silver, the seeds on their little parachutes, called the pappus, work as both seed propagation and medicine.

As we take our walk, please consider the following and write down your thoughts in your notebook or on the meal ticket.

Where are the dandelions located? Can you imagine the paths they've taken across the park?

Remember writing about citrus using your senses? Write down some words for how dandelions look, smell, and feel.

Write about what you felt and thought about when Sarah said dandelions are edible.

Are there any plants your family eats or uses for medicine that seem related to your friends?

The image shows a handwritten lesson plan and workshop notes for a dandelion field trip. It includes a map of the park area with various locations marked, and a photograph of a group of students sitting on the grass, engaged in a naturalist walk. The notes are written in black ink on a white background.

### Sample Lessons

The image shows a photograph of a Japanese Knotweed plant growing through a crack in the pavement. The plant has dark, pointed leaves and a thick, woody stem. The background is a light-colored, textured surface.

### Interviewing Each Other

The image of knotweed sprouting through the pavement evokes resilience, persistence, even resistance.

- Do you identify with a plant you have encountered before? If you can, think of a plant in NYC.
- What does that plant tell us about you or your family?

### Descriptive Writing

Black out all the words in the texts on your worksheet you do not want to use for your own writing.

Use this bank of words to write your own description, very short story, or poem about Japanese Knotweed ... or about yourself.

*PolYGONUM COMPESITUM*.—In *herbarium of the United States* of north of our continent, some of the figures similar to the plant now described being the stems of another species and identified.

Dr. Sibthorpe, De Vries (*P. suspensum*, Sibth. & Zucc. and Willd. *P. Zosterifolium*, Nees), Fig. 2183. Rising stout, handsome bushy somewhat woody perennial stalks rising to the ground in winter, growing 4-5 ft. high, the stem gracefully curving outward; the sheathes to orbicular-ovate, truncate or slightly notched at base, abruptly pointed, the strong side nerve white; in tropical forest somewhat short and flaring, deciduous. Fr. small and whitish, very numerous in dense slender-petioled racemes, the stem-pubescent and the achene trigonous. Japan. H. B. K. 6033. 2. 2. 1848, p. 621; 1848, p. 58. (1850, p. 317, 48 p. 1851, p. 44; 1852, p. 47; 1853, p. 5; 1854, p. 56.)

(1) Sample lesson on knotweed; (2) Dandelion walking lesson plan and workshop, Credit: Lynnette Widder; (3) Green Team naturalist walk with Columbia World Projects team, Credit: Lex Taylor.

**Monitoring and evaluation:** The *Planting Stories* project team created and applied qualitative tools to analyze the project’s progress and effectiveness. These included an Internal Activity Monitoring Tool, Instruction Reflection Forms, a Student Work Rubric, and Peer Review Forms—designed to track student engagement, learning outcomes, and curriculum development.

## Findings and Results

The project produced, piloted, and refined a one-of-its-kind teaching curriculum focused on enhancing high school students’ scientific, creative, and cultural knowledge and skills related to plants. A total of **140 students** participated in the project, engaging in activities ranging from foraging walks to family interviews and poetry writing. **Eleven Columbia graduate artist-teachers** received mentorship and training, many of whom described the experience as pivotal to their development as writers and educators. **Ten external experts** had the opportunity to share their expertise with a new audience of NYC high school students.

The initial findings from the qualitative content analysis indicated positive progress toward the project’s intended outcomes, particularly in building creative skills and cultural connections among students. The lessons learned from instructor reflections and peer reviews informed ongoing adjustments to the curriculum and classroom strategies, reinforcing the adaptability and promise of the *Planting Stories* model. This early-stage analysis underscores the future potential of the project, setting a strong foundation for scaling and formal evaluation in subsequent iterations.

“ Growing alongside a part of the fence in very rich ground, [the knotweed] was ten feet high and the stout stems came up together. He didn’t regard it as a pest at all. When in bloom its flowers are a delight to his family and passers-by, and heaven for the honey bees. Gracefully curving outwards, bold, perfectly hardy. It produced clouds of bloom. ”

— **excerpt** from student work

“ Students seemed really invested in writing and took initiative in drafting pieces about memories and social implications of chocolate. ”

— **excerpt** from teacher feedback

“ Recipes aren’t just ingredients, but the stories tying them to you. ”

— **excerpt** from student work

## Why Was This Project Important?

The Planting Stories project provided proof of concept on how interdisciplinary education, rooted in place and culture, can empower young people and educators. The project addressed a gap in secondary education—the intersection of environmental literacy, cultural awareness, and creative expression. By grounding writing in the physical and cultural experience of plants, the project helped students connect with their communities, families, and themselves in new ways. Planting Stories provided a new community site and template for teacher training and mentorship and cultivated new partnerships.

*Planting Stories* contributed to Columbia’s mission to serve society through knowledge in action in several ways. The project engaged and connected the University with important members of the local community and used the spaces of the New York City and its plants as the basis for its work. The project fostered reciprocal learning between graduate students and high schoolers, and between academic knowledge and lived experience. *Planting Stories* furthered a long history of collaboration between Columbia and CSS and deepened engagement between the University and other institutions, including the NYBG, with diverse expertise and constituencies.

“ I was looking for teaching experience and I couldn’t have asked for a better site placement...It was my first classroom teaching experience and it really prepared me for the teaching fellowship I now have. ”

— **Planting Stories Student Teacher**

“ It was both an advantage and a challenge to undertake the project without a predetermined curriculum to test. The analogy to building a ship while sailing holds—we began with a well-designed vessel built upon our experience of teaching and our knowledge of plant pathways, but needed along the way to make corrections and changes to adapt our approach to what we found. This meant we could be agile and responsive, co-creating our project with our collaborators, including at CSS. ”

— **Professor Lynnette Widder**

## Next Steps

The team has identified several promising avenues for sustaining and growing Planting Stories’ work:

- **Bridge funding:** Support from SPS Academic Affairs allows programming to continue through and furthers evaluation and documentation activities.
- **New partners in NYC:** Conversations are ongoing with several New York City based organizations
- **Educational research:** Engagement with Teachers College will help integrate education research into the project’s next phase, strengthening grant applications and scholarly documentation.
- The project also anticipates more documentation, for example via workshops and teaching tools, in academic publications, or open-source white papers.

## Project Team

- Lynnette Widder, Professor of Practice, Columbia University School of Professional Studies
- Anelise Chen, Assistant Professor of Creative Writing, Columbia University School of the Arts
- Ana Paulina Lee, Associate Professor of Latin American and Iberian Cultures, Columbia University (former)
- Darby Minow Smith, Adjunct Assistant Professor, Columbia University School of the Arts (former)

## For More Information:

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