

# Talking to Plants

by Carol Barany

Earlier this year, ‘The Washington Post’ reported on a 2022 survey by trees.com. Responding to one of the survey’s questions, 50% of 1,250 respondents reported that they talked to their plants and trees. When asked why, 65% of the talkers said they believe it helps plants grow

England's King Charles, a life-long and passionate gardener, has revealed in interviews that, "I just come and talk to the plants, really. Very important to talk to them; they respond". His fruits and vegetables were “a damned sight bigger because I instructed them to be.”

In 2020, at a reception featuring pop star Katy Perry, an ambassador for one of his favorite charities, Charles asked her if she would sing to his plants. “You have my word, sir”, was Perry’s reply.

Maybe gardeners have always talked to their plants, but a German experimental psychologist may have been the first to formally propose in 1848 that plants respond to talk, attention, attitude, and affection. Those concepts have endured. Perhaps some of you readers remember the 1970 album, “Music to Grow Plants By”.

Are plants really listening? In 2004, the Discovery Channel’s science entertainment show ‘Mythbusters’ tried to find out. Negative speech was played in two greenhouses, while two greenhouses played positive speech. To test the effect of music, one greenhouse played classical while another played heavy metal. There was silence in a single greenhouse. After 60 days, the least growth occurred in the silent greenhouse. The greenhouses with music grew the most, especially the plants exposed to heavy metal. The plants in the greenhouses with speech — either positive or negative — grew faster than those with silence.

Featuring several ‘Mythbusters’ episodes, including the one on talking to plants, the Denver Museum of Nature and Science opened a special exhibition in 2013. To make it more interactive, the Museum invited its Twitter followers to Tweet at a plant through the project's official website. More than 4,000 Tweets; some kind and nurturing, some angry and insulting, were turned into robotic speech and read to one indoor plant. A plant in another greenhouse got the silent treatment.

Whether they were called “stupid” and “ugly”, or “champs” and “State Fair winners”, it’s all the same. Accounting for every other variable, the more social plant in the Denver study had greener, larger leaves and was 12.5 percent taller.

Is there something to this?

Until there is additional peer-reviewed, scientifically validated research, these investigations are at best considered “pseudoscience”. The intriguing observations could spark more rigorous, university- based research. That’s what it takes to confirm cause-and-effect relationships like these. For example, any vibration, not just from speech or music, could be responsible for plant growth.

But please, don’t let that stop you from talking to your plants, because it will make YOU feel better.

We all have days when we can’t get enough of the garden. It often happens in early spring, after being cooped up in the house for months. Flitting from plant to plant like bumblebees, we coo, chirp, and lavish best wishes to all green things. Life IS a magnificent garden, at least for now.

Fast forward to mid-July. Returning home from a short vacation, I can’t wait to see what’s new in the garden. It’s not what I expected. Silver maple seeds have germinated in garden beds by the bazillions. The roses demand, “dead-head me now.” The faded blossoms of my daylilies hang from their stems like mushy socks, taunting me with their ugliness. What’s more, several hibiscus are dangerously wilted. This means there’s another glitch in the drip irrigation system, and if I don’t fix it right away, the entire garden will be crispy by sundown.

By now, I’m muttering under my breath, wishing these darned plants weren’t so needy. It gets worse. The dahlias grew so fast last week that they are leaning, top-heavy and about to topple, and must be tied once again to their stakes. And for crying out loud, a dahlia I nurtured from a cutting since early March had the nerve to up and die on me.

Avoiding any personal responsibility, I blame this mess on the plants themselves. I vent a scathing garden rant to any plant who may be listening. I feel better immediately.

Whether it’s cooing affection, or threatening a trip to the compost pile, talking to plants is deeply satisfying. But until real science proves otherwise, I think plants could care less.

What is important is plunking the right plant in the right place. Given optimum water, light, soil, and weather, plants will thrive. And though they can’t speak, plants send gardeners messages all the time, warning of potential trouble in paradise.

All we have to do is listen.

