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Review: Allergy-Free Gardening: The Revolutionary Guide to Healthy Landscaping

By Thomas Leo Ogren

Reviewed by [William Ted Johnson](#)
Chandler Public Library, USA

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Ogren, Thomas Leo. *Allergy-free Gardening: The Revolutionary Guide to Healthy Landscaping*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2000. 267 pp. ISBN 1-58008-200-9 (cloth); 1-58008-166-5 (paperback). US\$32.95 cloth; US\$19.95 paperback

Ambiguity surrounds any discussion of allergies. While this title represents a significant effort to quantify the allergy potential associated with a variety of plants and the landscapes where they grow, it overstates the case against many species found in home and community gardens across North America.

The author's system of allergy classification (OPALS Ogren Plant-Allergy Scale) relies heavily upon the type of pollen associated with a particular species (specific gravity, shape, stickiness), though a number of additional factors are considered, including: odors, flowering period, and skin contact with leaves, stems, sap, roots, bulbs, etc.

Plant-insect relationships are even included. For example, the likelihood of encountering aphids on some plants (grapes *Vitis*) affects its allergy potential. Unfortunately, the manner in which these factors are considered to come up with a single score from 1 to 10 is not explained, leaving one with the impression that the whole system relies more on subjective estimation than scientific objectivity.

The text consists of two parts. Part one is an explanation of allergy-free gardening. Use of the term "gardening" is somewhat misleading in that the author is talking more about general landscaping than specific types of gardening (e.g. vegetable gardening).

He acknowledges the challenge of actually creating an "allergy-free" garden, but claims this can be done by planting only female plants. "We can select female-only cultivars that do not cause contact allergies and do not present odor challenges. The right female garden would not release a single grain of pollen, ever! Such a garden would be truly allergy-free" (p. 11). It would also be free of some of the most widely used and popular plants found in landscapes today. Such a narrow focus in landscape design undermines recent efforts to consider the holistic value of native plantscapes that save water and maintenance costs while attracting local wildlife. Erosion control,

aesthetics, and cost should receive as much consideration as a plant's allergy potential. As suggested in the text, individuality is an important factor when it comes to allergies (p. 104 entry for Ficus) . This suggests that an individual's reaction to a plant should be the basis for deciding whether or not to include it in your home landscape. Why avoid mulberry trees on the basis of its allergy potential if the only thing you are allergic to is olive pollen?

A number of studies have led to more questions than answers when it comes to the relationship between pollen and allergies. For example, D'Amato (1999) suggests that this issue is more complex than simply removing pollen bearing trees from our urban landscapes. He found that air pollution hitches a ride on pollen and modifies its allergy potential. Driessen and Quanjer (1991) suggest that pollen is unable to induce an immunological response in a person's lower respiratory tract. They state that, "pollen asthma probably results from a gradual cumulative effect of deposition of small amounts of allergen in lower airways, and is hence poorly correlated with daily pollen counts." Ogren states that "avoidance is the key to allergy relief" (p. xix). When it comes to contact with airborne pollen, significant allergy relief from your own "allergy-free" garden may be minimal since airborne pollen often travels some distance and contact with pollen from sources outside your immediate control is likely (*Something in the Air* 1998, Raynor 1970, Raynor and Ogden 1965).

Finally, Ogren's assertion that "allergy-free gardens" act as "pollen traps" by removing significant quantities of pollen from the atmosphere is unsupported by experimental evidence (Nowak 2000, Ogden, Raynor, and Hayes 1975).

Part two is an alphabetical list of plants with their OPALS allergy rating. A brief commentary accompanies each entry along with photographs or drawings for many of the plants included. Not all plants have been rated for their potential to cause allergies. This is understandable considering the huge number of plants listed. However, careless statements such as those referring to the cactus family as having night blooming flowers pollinated by moths and Tamarix as a native of the Arizona desert suggest greater attention to detail would have greatly improved the reliability of the text.

Due to the increasing incidence of allergies and asthma in the U.S. and abroad, many allergy sufferers in a "self-help" society will be attracted to this title. However, this title is not recommended due to the subjectivity of the allergy rating system as presented, lack of objective evidence for true relief by planting an "allergy-free" garden, and lack of attention to detail in some sections of the text.

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