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The Triumph of Seeds: Our huge debt to tiny marvels

19 April 2015 by [Adrian Barnett](#)

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Human culture might have been very different if it wasn't for the extraordinary survival strategies of seeds, finds a book by Thor Hansen

Book information

The Triumph of Seeds: How grains, nuts, kernels, pulses, and pips conquered the plant kingdom and shaped human history by Thor Hansen

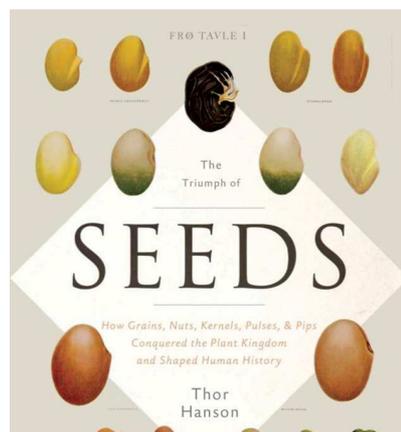
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Seeds have many cunning survival strategies, including desiccation (*Image: Frederique Jouval/picturetank*)

"THAT spark of dormant life may be hidden and hard to measure, but mother plants will do almost anything to protect it," writes conservation biologist Thor Hansen, describing the marvels that are seeds.



Ranging from the human-head-sized coconut to the dust-fine contents of the vanilla orchid pod, we see how seeds are far more than lumps of plant tissue, waiting around for watering before they spring into action. They are a plant's babies, lifeboats of genetic succession cast off into the sea of an uncertain future.

Without the act and anticipation of planting seeds and harvesting them, Hansen insists, there could be no agriculture as we know it. Instead, our species would still be wandering in small bands of hunters, gatherers and herdsmen. Without seeds, human history might have been very different.



The triumph of the book's title is attributable to seeds being both well provisioned with rations and replete with cunning devices to repel boarders and ensure success once a germination-friendly spot is reached. Seeds are finely crafted survival machines, designed to withstand whatever chance, change or the teeth and intestines of animals might bring.

Hansen's book is packed with facts, figures and colour: seed plants make up more than 90 per cent of the world's flora; in Egypt, the word *aish* means both bread and life; the shape of the stealth bomber aircraft was inspired by the flying-wing design of Javan cucumber seeds. The pages burst with enthusiasm and observation, as the author explores the role of seeds in human evolution and the rise of civilisations, tracking back to an antiquity that began with *Homo erectus*.

We travel from deep-frozen gene banks, via academics studying how seeds survive centuries of desiccation, to the vibrant natural world. Here, Hansen explores the origins of seed evolution, and the variety of colours, shapes, sizes and survival strategies they possess.

In the modern world, with more than half of us living in cities, we take seeds for granted. Yet if you had coffee or bread today, thank a seed. If you cook with a vegetable oil, you are using the energy store of an ungerminated baby plant. The annual output of the bean (a seed, of course) provides protein for more of the world's population than all cows, chicken and fish combined. And while one seed-making species, wheat, covers more of Earth than any other crop, the globe's 32,000 seed-producing species are its dominant botanical force.

With light, engaging prose Hansen shows how the little spheroids we tip out of a packet are in fact supremely elegant genetic time capsules. *The Triumph of Seeds* takes you past the casing into the extraordinary inner working of objects without which our landscapes, dinner plates and gardens would be unrecognisable. You will never be able to look at an orange pip or a sunflower seed in the same way again.

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