

Editorial

The chloroplasts of green plant endosymbiotic cyanobacteria

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Plants are mainly multicellular organisms, predominantly photosynthetic eukaryotes of the kingdom Plantae. Historically, plants were treated as one of two kingdoms including all living things that were not animals, and all algae and fungi were treated as plants. However, all current definitions of Plantae exclude the fungi and some algae, as well as the prokaryotes (the archaea and bacteria). By one definition, plants form the clade Viridiplantae (Latin name for “green plants”), a group that includes the flowering plants, conifers and other gymnosperms, ferns and their allies, hornworts, liverworts, mosses, and the green algae, but excludes the red and brown algae. Green plants obtain most of their energy from sunlight via photosynthesis by primary chloroplasts that are derived from endosymbiosis with cyanobacteria. Their chloroplasts contain chlorophylls a and b, which gives them their green color. Some plants are parasitic or mycotrophic and have lost the ability to produce normal amounts of chlorophyll or to photosynthesize, but still have flowers, fruits, and seeds. Plants are characterized by sexual reproduction and alternation of generations, although asexual reproduction is also common. There are about 320,000 species of plants, of which the great majority, some 260–290 thousand, produce seeds. Green plants provide a substantial proportion of the world’s molecular oxygen, and the plants basis of most of Earth’s ecosystems. Plants that produce grain, fruit, and vegetables also form basic human foods and have been domesticated for millennia. Plants have many cultural and other uses, as ornaments, building materials, writing material and, in great variety, they have been the source of medicines and psychoactive drugs. The scientific study of plants is known as botany, a branch of biology. All living things were traditionally placed into one of two groups, plants and animals. This classification may date from Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC), who made the distinction between plants, which generally do

not move, and animals, which often are mobile to catch their food. Much later, when Linnaeus (1707–1778) created the basis of the modern system of scientific classification, these two groups became the kingdoms Vegetabilia (later Metaphyta or Plantae) and Animalia (also called Metazoa). Since then, it has become clear that the plant kingdom as originally defined included several unrelated groups, and the fungi and several groups of algae were removed to new kingdoms. However, these organisms are still often considered plants, particularly in popular contexts. The term “plant” generally implies the possession of the following traits: multicellularity, possession of cell walls containing cellulose, and the ability to carry out photosynthesis with primary chloroplasts. Algae comprise several different groups of organisms which produce food by photosynthesis and thus have traditionally been included in the plant kingdom. The seaweeds range from large multicellular algae to single-celled organisms and are classified into three groups, the green algae, red algae and brown algae. There is good evidence that the brown algae evolved independently from the others, from non-photosynthetic ancestors that formed endosymbiotic relationships with red algae rather than from cyanobacteria, and they are no longer classified as plants as defined here. The Viridiplantae, the green plants – green algae and land plants – form a clade, a group consisting of all the descendants of a common ancestor. With a few exceptions, the green plants have the following features in common; primary chloroplasts derived from cyanobacteria containing chlorophylls a and b, cell walls containing cellulose, and food stores in the form of starch contained within the plastids. They undergo closed mitosis without centrioles, and typically have mitochondria with flat cristae. The chloroplasts of green plants are surrounded by two membranes, suggesting they originated directly from endosymbiotic cyanobacteria.

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