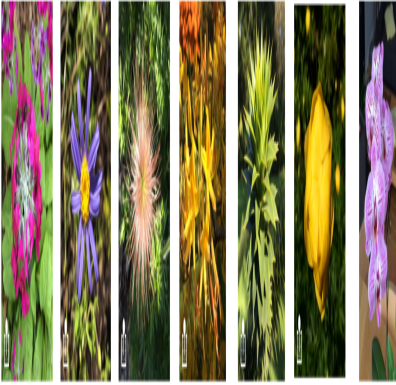




There's an app for that

Description

Long before smartphones existed I undertook a course that taught me to identify plant specimens. This was part of my landscape architecture degree. The course was to help designers select plants for parks, gardens, street planting, national parks, reclamation sites, etc. I learned the botanical names by rote of a couple of hundred species, mostly those available in and around Melbourne.

I am now less skilled at identifying plants due to lack of practice and moving to a different climate zone with a new range of plants. I no longer need to make plant selections, and don't currently have access to a garden. But the urge to identify and classify lingers.

Something similar applies when people identify and classify buildings, cars, paintings, furniture, stamps, dogs, birds and butterflies. One way to exercise your interest (or passion) in something is to demonstrate prowess in identification and classification, even beyond any practical benefits e.g. to help you acquire, manage, design for, specify, or otherwise engage with such objects.

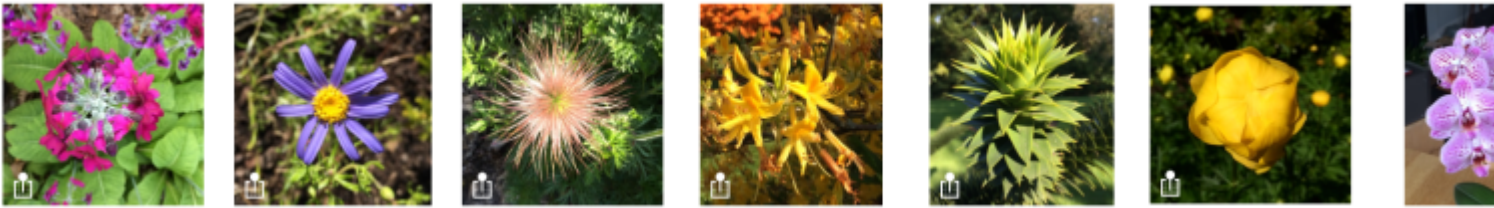
Amateur classification

To identify and classify is the stock of the collector and hobbyist. The economist Thorsten Veblen saw such hobbies as a way for the rich to soak up excess time and to demonstrate that they were of the leisured class. Such practices were then taken up by a growing middle class who wished to follow the rich, and to demonstrate in some measure a similar temporal and cognitive surplus. Learning to identify and classify soaks up time.

One of the benefits of the game of identification and classification is it's a skill that can be *demonstrated*. It's an opportunity to show off to a receptive audience. For the more astute it's an excuse for a conversation. To identify, classify, speculate, argue and correct is a particular conversational gambit, a bit like telling stories.

When the insistent tourist asks the local resident about what style or period the old pub belongs to it's not always vital that the answer is right. We wouldn't like to think we are being delivered falsehoods, but the tourist needs a story, and sometimes any time, place, style, and name suffices to

give it substance.



Such leisure skills (identifying and classifying) in fact keep us conversing. They contribute to our sociability. When a true expert prepared to deliver the facts enters the conversation then the discussion becomes one-sided, and possibly peters out. The conversation moves elsewhere. Communicants who question, speculate, debate, deal in half truths, and pool their ignorance can string out a conversation about identification and classification for some time, as long as there's no expert within earshot.

As is well known to any student of metaphor, classification systems vary, though some have more authority than others. Outside of an academic discipline some classifications have more social cachet than others. At one stage I knew about the vast array of liverworts and mosses, which are just as abundant and important as more charismatic plant species, but the specimens are generally small, and don't make for good conversation during a walk through the countryside or a garden. For good reason most people are more interested in flowers than mosses.

Identify and classify

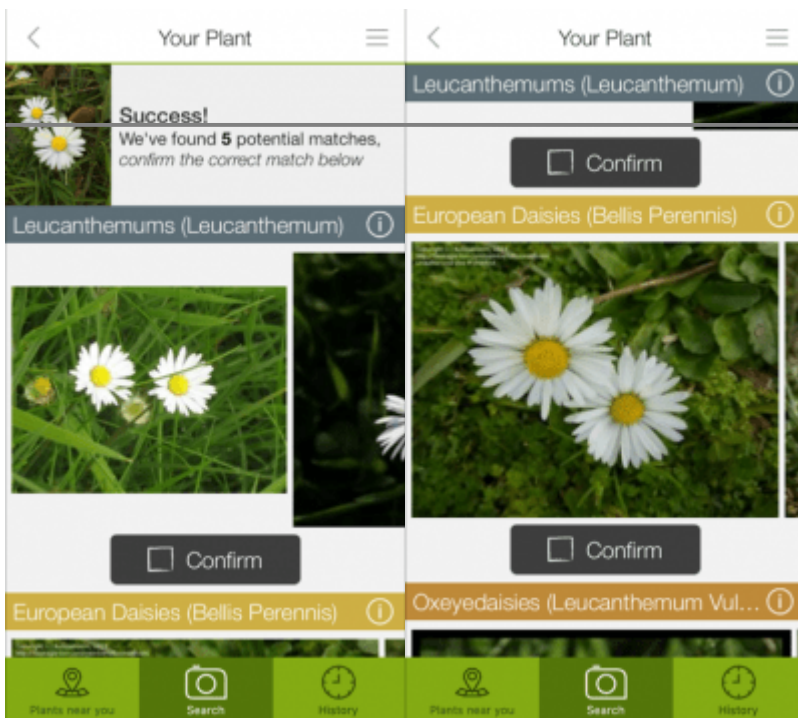
At this time of year, flowers are the thing, and there are apps for that. So here's a new hobby – compiling a photographic dossier of plants, complete with names and labels, and showing that off to people who don't yet know about the app. You can also share the information on social media, and there's a map of the world with photographic samples from other app users.

Take a photo of a plant with your smartphone and the [LikeThat Garden](#) app will match the visual pattern against its database and come up with a good guess at identifying the plant. It will also identify other close matches. There's a crowd-sourced aspect to the app. As the database of images grows so the app becomes more accurate. The system is backed up with plant information from wikipedia.

No-name apps

Such apps risk removing one of those practices that keep us sociable, or at least modifies our practices. Instead of speculating on the name, species, variety or properties of a flower during a walk in the countryside, you don't bother as you know *there's an app for that*. There's a risk therefore that people will start to care less about the amateur identification game. Why waste time talking about plants if you know you could look it up with an app, if you were bothered?

There's a further risk. Losing the ability to name a thing diminishes our semiotic engagement with certain elements in the world. Semioticians don't seem to agree that everything significant has a name, but most agree that everything with a name is significant in some way or other to someone. So the inability to identify and classify, that is, to have a name for a thing, effectively renders it invisible, at least for the moment, or maybe forever.



default watermark

Bibliography

- Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How Forests Think: Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press
- Veblen, Thorstein. 1998. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus. First published in 1899.
- Lakoff, George. 2003. *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Notes

- The reflection on naming was sparked by a conversation with sociologist Lynne Jameson about flowers this week.
- It's interesting that this particular app is most reliable with strong shapes, and flowers are good for that.
- Also see post [How the Internet kills curiosity](#).

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. classification
2. metaphor
3. nature

Date Created

June 4, 2016

Author

rcoyne99

default watermark