

An Orchard Invisible: A Natural History of Seeds, by Jonathan Silvertown (Chicago, £11)



"A seed hidden in the heart of an apple is an orchard invisible." This is the evocative Welsh proverb from which Jonathan Silvertown takes his title. His engaging natural history demonstrates the truth of this saying, revealing the biological secrets of seeds and their role in human culture. The largest seed is that of the coco de mer palm, which grows on the Seychelles, its fruit weighing in at an astonishing 23kg. It is 20bn times heavier than the smallest seed, that of the orchid, which weighs a mere 10-millionth of a gram. With an enjoyably meandering style, Silvertown explores the 360m-year history of seeds, from how they evolved and grow, to how we exploit them for food and even for poison - Georgi Markov was murdered with a pellet containing less than one two-thousandth of a gram of ricin, the most deadly poison known, from castor beans. The ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi once said: "To see things in the seed, that is genius." As Silvertown ably shows, there is indeed much to be discovered in the story of seeds.

PD Smith