

A one-stop shop for plant science questions

Tabitha Innocent (Sense About Science)

Anyone with questions about aspects of plant science that come up in public discussion can now put them directly to researchers, from one simple portal. Tabitha Innocent, Scientific Liaison at Sense About Science, talks about the Plant Science Panel, sponsored by the Biochemical Society.

At Sense About Science we are being asked questions all the time about plant science stories in the news: Ash Dieback disease, GM crops, bees and pesticides, mycotoxins in food, biofuels... What evidence do we have? Should I be worried? Does the government's response make sense? Plant research is central to decisions about future energy, land use, wildlife, environmental protection, pest problems, nutrition, food safety and security. People care a lot about these subjects, but get frustrated by conflicting stories and research reports and find that information is difficult to find in a form that responds to their specific questions.

Over the last year, leading research institutions and learned societies across the UK have come together to make themselves available in an online public panel, where people can put down questions and opinions for response. The Plant Science Panel, hosted on the Sense About Science website and partnered by the Biochemical Society among others, is designed to be a one-stop shop for plant science questions. The particular 'public-led, expert-fed' approach means that the agenda on the forum is set by what people are actually interested in asking or concerned by, which sometimes contains a few surprises, for us and for the scientists involved.

The Plant Science Panel gives people the opportunity to put forward their questions on issues around plants, the environment and food directly to more than 40 scientists. It is an open and ongoing invitation from researchers to anyone who wants to get in touch and talk to them. In the first year, scientists answered over 500 questions from the public. And it is now well on the way to establishing itself as the place to go for people with concerns about plant science issues.

The panel was established following recent debates on subjects such as GM. We knew that the UK's plant research institutions have brilliant outreach going on; however, it became clear to us at Sense About Science,



from the many questions we were getting in the wake of debates on land use, Rothamsted's GM wheat research and so on, that we still had two problems. One was that you have to be quite 'in the know' about the most suitable place to find answers. The other was that it isn't feasible for researchers to respond privately to individuals when lots of people want to be involved. The beauty of having a public panel, where everyone can follow conversations and take up points themselves, is that knowledge and experience can be brought together in one place; and for experienced researchers, knowing that lots of people will continue to benefit from their answers means that their time is well spent.

Alongside the questions coming in to the panel, we also hold live online Q&A sessions to tackle particularly topical subjects, during which people can ask questions by email or using the hashtag #plantsci on Twitter. The

first sessions tackled the Big Question surrounding plant science, agri-technology and the public: genetically modified foods. Since then, subsequent Q&A sessions have looked at Ash Dieback, bee colony collapse, 'growing' medicine and organic farming (and you can see all the Q&A sessions on the Plant Science Panel webpage at www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/live-online-qas.html).

The panel has covered a lot of ground well beyond the classic GM debate, covering the many areas of everyday life that feature plant science. The questions submitted and answered outside of the live Q&A sessions are broader still, including phenotypic plasticity, food system resilience, *Jurassic Park* plants, nutrient uptake by roots, and why nutrient burn causes leaf tips to brown and curl. And we receive questions not only from individuals, but also from civic and community groups and charities, including those not traditionally involved in discussions around plant science, such as the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals), the Royal Horticultural Society, the Bee Conservation Trust, Coeliac UK and RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds). They in turn then spread the word about the Q&A sessions to their broader networks and this prompts more questions coming in.

At the launch of the panel Kate Baillie, Chief Executive of the Biochemical Society, said: "We must take care to listen to and respond to the public on the issues surrounding plant science innovations. The Plant Science Panel is an important step forward, allowing the public to directly question scientists on important and controversial scientific issues in this area." And the scientists involved are enjoying doing just that! Panel member Dr Wendy Harwood described taking part in a live Q&A: "The range of questions was fascinating, some drilling down into technical detail, some more general and some I would never have thought of asking at all... For me, the chance to respond to questions from anyone, anywhere who might be concerned about some of the issues was very rewarding". So whether you are a plant scientist yourself, or couldn't tell an Oak from an Ash, do visit the Plant Science Panel pages: send us your questions, see what others have asked and share the resource with anyone who would find it useful. ■

You can find full details of the Plant Science Panel at www.senseaboutscience.org/pages/plant-science-expert-panel.html. Questions can be sent via Twitter (@senseaboutsci using #plantsci), by posting on the Sense About Science Facebook page, or by emailing plantsci@senseaboutscience.org

You can read more about all of Sense About Science's work at www.senseaboutscience.org.