

Carleton University
Summer 2026 Preliminary Course Outline
Department of English

ENGL 4115A/5900S: Culture and the Text/
Selected Topic in English Studies I

Plant Literacy and Literature

Prerequisites: fourth-year standing or permission of the department
Preclusions: N/A

Instructor: Prof. Robin Norris
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***** This is a preliminary syllabus only—texts and assignments are subject to change. A complete version will be available closer to the start of the term. *****

Course description: Plants have been important throughout human history for reasons of both survival and culture. Although plants have been central to mythologies and folklore around the globe, today our personal awareness of plants is at an all-time low. This is an experiential learning course that combines fieldwork, experiential learning, and text-based discussion to develop plant literacy and increase awareness of the plant life in our environment while redefining our understanding of literacy. Writing assignments will emphasize reflection on the experiential learning aspects of the course. The intersecting goals of the course are to explore the concept of literacy while expanding our ability to perceive and engage with plants, as well as considering new methods of observation and understanding by challenging fixed notions of knowledge and being. We will spend at least half of our time outdoors in all safe conditions (e.g., excluding active thunderstorms).

In Summer 2026, the course will focus on trees. I have received funding from CUASA's new fund for Indigenous programming and am attempting to work with the Centre for Indigenous Support and Community Engagement to bring a Knowledge Keeper to work with our class on two dates.

Learning Outcomes:

Students will develop their understanding of the concepts of literacy and plant literacy.
Students will increase their plant vocabulary by learning new words and their plant literacy by learning to identify a number of plants that were previously unfamiliar to them.
Students will read and respond to literary texts and cultural concepts about plants.
Students will analyze differences in how plants have been named, catalogued, categorized, written about, and engaged with in various cultural contexts.

Texts:

Contemporary authors we may read may include: Báýò Akómoláfé, Amal El-Mohtar, Amitav Ghosh, Bruno Latour, Robert Macfarlane, Robin Wall Kimmerer. Medieval texts we may read may include creation myths, The Dream of the Rood, Exeter Book riddles, the Nine Herbs Charm, and the Old English Rune Poem.

In addition to any required texts for purchase, students should purchase a field guide to Ontario trees. Students should also budget for printing and/or purchasing a coursepack. Readings and resources will also be made available on Brightspace.

Evaluation will likely include the following:

Attendance, interactions, and involvement

Participation in reading discussions

Participation in reflective writing discussions

Facilitation of experiential learning activity

Tree literacy tests

A final project of the student's own design