

Jean Senebier Biography

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Biography

Jean Senebier was a Swiss botanist who is credited with being the first scientist to demonstrate the principle of photosynthesis. Senebier, the son of merchant Jean-Antoine Senebier, was born in Geneva, Switzerland, on May 6, 1742. Despite a strong interest in natural history, Senebier bowed to his family's wishes and became a minister. At age 23 he published a well-received thesis on polygamy and in 1765 he was ordained as a pastor of the Protestant church in Geneva. Still, young Senebier did not abandon his interest in the sciences and he spent a year in Paris where he became acquainted with a number of scientists and artists. One of his new friends, Charles Bonnet, was particularly influential in developing Senebier's interest in plant physiology and encouraged him to perform several experiments. Bonnet's influence also led Senebier to write a paper on the art of observing in response to a question raised by the Netherlands Society of Sciences in 1768. In 1769 Senebier became pastor of a church in Chancy, a small town near Geneva, but in 1773 he resigned this position to follow his interest in the sciences. He took a position as librarian for the Republic of Geneva.

In 1777 Senebier translated the first volume of work by Lazzaro Spallanzani, the Italian physiologist who is one of the founders of experimental biology. Over the next several years he translated most of the other works by Spallanzani. In 1779, Senebier published his own work, *Action de la lumière sur la végétation*, which described his theories on the process of photosynthesis. This work established his credentials in the scientific community, and Senebier became the focus of a group of young like-minded scientists that included Pierre Huber, A.P. de Candolle, Jean-Antoine Colladon, and Nicholas Saussure.

Senebier was the first to discover that plants absorb carbonic acid gas and release oxygen. He described how plants exchange gasses in his 1788 paper *Expériences sur l'action de la lumière solaire dans la végétation*. Senebier also worked closely with Françoise Huber to study bees, and together they published a paper on the subject in 1801: *Influence de l'air dans la germination*. In 1802 he published *Essai sur l'art d'observer et de faire des expériences* which expanded his ideas on the art of observing and established much of the scientific method. Senebier died in Geneva on July 22, 1809.