Notes R.B.G. Edinb. 38(2):356 (1980)

BOOK REVIEW

The Rhododendron Green Book. This long awaited Handbook*, 13 years after the last edition, is now available. It was intended to publish new editions every 5 years and a draft was almost ready for publication in the early 1970s. At that time Drs James Cullen and David Chamberlain started a complete revision of Rhododendron, and it was decided to postpone publication until this revision was finished and incorporate this work in some way into the new handbook. Great credit must be given to Dr Alan Leslie of Wisley for finishing the revised draft so quickly after Cullen & Chamberlain completed their work.

In his Foreword, Mr C. D. Brickell of Wisley explains about the inclusion of cross reference tables, so introducing the rhododendron growing public to the Cullen & Chamberlain revision, together with the use of the word 'Group' for retaining names of horticultural value for plants banished to synonomy. The rest of the book follows the pattern of the old handbooks. There is also a list of species which according to Cullen & Chamberlain do not apparently fit into their classification.

The main alphabetical list of species now includes the *Vireya* (Malesian) species which are in cultivation in the British Isles, North America and Australia. This list follows the old Balfourian system (as found in *The Species of Rhododendron*) but includes new names described by Mr Davidian of Edinburgh, such as *R. piercei* and *R. bergii*, whether they are accepted by Cullen & Chamberlain or not. A few old specific names such as *R. coryphaeum* have, without any explanation, become synonyms since 1967 as have the so-called geographical forms of *R. vernicosum*, while *R. micromeres* has been omitted (presumably by mistake) altogether. Changes are constantly being made such as the now accepted name *R. adenosum* which is listed as *R. kuluense*.

The list of synonyms has been improved to include authorities and a number of wild or garden hybrids, perhaps previously treated as species. Collectors' numbers are brought up to date to include recent expeditions and collectors are listed alphabetically for easy reference. This list does not contain Malesian collections, as it was not possible to get these ready in time.

A revision of the genus *Rhododendron* has been long awaited and Sir Isaac Bayley Balfour freely admitted that his 'Series' method of classification was nothing but a temporary stopgap. No classification is perfect and this genus was never meant by nature to be divided up to fit into neat cubby-holes. Species such as *R. sherriffii*, *R. fulgens* and *R. wightii* make a complete mockery of any classification. To my mind the first two have their closest relations in *R. lopsangianum* and *R. succothii* respectively and yet on account of the presence or absence of indumentum have to be separated, disregarding all other common characters. Both the old and new classifications fall down on species like these, but it is accepted in botanical circles that further changes will have to be made as knowledge increases. Apart from a few examples like the above, the Cullen & Chamberlain revision must be considered a great improvement on the old Balfourian system. In the latter, all 'Series' had equal rank regardless of the true relationships. Now, with the use of subgenera, sections and subsections, a much truer perspective has been arrived at.

With these thoughts in mind, let us consider how this new Handbook will assist the keen amateur species enthusiast and ask the following questions. As a check list of species in cultivation? Yes. As a help to select the best and most suitable species? Very little. As an introduction to the Cullen & Chamberlain Revision? Not nearly as much as it could have done.

The tables introducing the revision are confusing, especially as they are not in any way alphabetical. Attempting to find any particular species is a mammoth task and it is even hard to track down many of the changes without constantly referring to the Balfourian Series list.

The main section of alphabetically listed species now lacks any flower or leaf ratings; only an occasional flower or leaf abbreviation in bold print indicates superiority, which cannot be of much practical use. The brief, simplified botanical descriptions have to some extent been improved and brought up to date, but are only a bare guide towards identification, comparison with other species, or choosing which species to select for one's garden. But the greatest failure of this list is the complete exclusion of the Cullen & Chamberlain Revision. If the tables had been easier to understand and the Revision had been incorporated into the main list (e.g. in brackets), the whole handbook would have been a real step towards a rapid and complete change-over. As it is, by the time another handbook arrives with perhaps the change-over completed, many of us may be in another world. It is certainly a retrograde step that certain circles of the Royal Horticultural Society's hierarchy have not seen the way clear to introduce this revision properly to the rhododendron growing public. Perhaps they are hoping that the revision will quietly be forgotten about!

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* *The Rhododendron Handbook 1980.* Rhododendron species in cultivation. Alan Leslie. The Royal Horticultural Society, Vincent Square, London. Soft cover.