

BOOK REVIEW

The European Garden Flora.* In May 1986, a swift two years after the publication of vol. II, vol. I of this greatly needed work appeared. It may seem odd that vol. II appeared first, but this was apparently due to various logistical reasons. This aside, we now have two of the six volumes which takes us from pteridophytes, gymnosperms and 16 families of monocots (up to Iridaceae) in vol. I and from Juncaceae to Orchidaceae completing the monocots in vol. II. Despite the Editorial Committee, Advisors and Contributors numbering nearly 40 well-known botanists, the speed at which this work is being produced is impressive.

That the necessity for such a Flora exists is evident if one tries to identify garden plants; where does one go for up-to-date sound information? The *RHS Dictionary*, good though it has been, is now rather dated, includes much, perhaps unwanted, information about gardening in general and many of its keys are rather suspect. W. J. Bean (*Trees & Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles*), though containing a wealth of valuable information does not include keys and often fails to make useful diagnostic comparisons. For instance, if trying to determine which, say, of three possible species in fruit, a particular specimen is, one description may mention the size and colour of the fruit, the second the colour only, and in the third there may be no mention of fruit at all! Bean, as with the useful Krussman (*Manual of Cultivated Broadleaved Trees & Shrubs & Manual of Cultivated Conifers*), only deals with trees and shrubs.

One may endlessly criticize other general works which deal with the identification of garden plants but this is fruitless: the point simply is that garden plant taxonomy has its own special problems which have to be recognized as different from wild plant taxonomy and this can lead to endless difficulties and confusion. Some of these taxonomic problems are directly related to gardening and include hybridisation between species of widely different geographical locations, selection of 'better' forms and changes in gross morphology due to enhanced culture and reduction in competition, to mention but a few. Who, for instance, would like to unravel the *Hosta* story, dogged as it is with so many of these dilemmas? Such a Flora, then, is bound to be fraught with all sorts of taxonomic problems: ultimately though, it has to be scientifically sound but still 'user friendly' to so many groups. This Flora walks the tightrope very skilfully: its keys and descriptions are thorough and accurate yet the language is as non-technical as possible. Unfortunately it is not always possible to use simple language, so at the end of each volume there is a glossary containing good clear diagrams.

It could be argued that vol. II contained many families of limited or specialist interest, but this is certainly not the case with vol. I, containing as it does such important horticultural families as Cupressaceae, Pinaceae, Liliaceae, Amaryllidaceae and Iridaceae. It starts with the ferns, a group of plants that deserves to be far more cultivated and available. Perhaps the reason why they are not used very much is due to lack of knowledge and the aura of mystique that surrounds their descriptions and nomenclature. How refreshing then, to see clear diagrams illustrating the terminology used in fern descriptions, silhouette photocopies of their fronds and a layout on the pages treating their descriptions in the same straightforward way as higher plants.

The next section, dealing with conifers, gives full descriptions of 188 species and makes passing reference to many more plus some cultivars. I found the keys worked very well and the descriptions were short and concise. The keys and descriptions dwelt almost exclusively on vegetative characters which shows that the authors had thought carefully about their readership. Most non-taxonomists find floral and cone terminology in conifers difficult and will certainly appreciate this approach. The pteridophytes and gymnosperms take just over one quarter of the book, the rest is filled with the first 16 genera of monocots. Many large and tricky genera are covered such as *Iris* (93 species), *Lilium* (52 species), *Hosta* (26 species) and *Narcissus* (43 species). With so many taxa covered one can only make general observations: but these are very favourable. The editors have done a creditable job in organizing so many contributors to stick with concise, factual descriptions all conforming to

*Walters, S. M. et al. *The European Garden Flora. A manual for the identification of plants cultivated in Europe, both out-of-doors and under glass*. Vol. I: Pteridophyta, Gymnospermae, Angiospermae—Monocotyledons (Part I). Pp. xv, 430; 44 figs, 1 map. Cambridge University Press. 1986. ISBN 0 521 24859 0. £55.

the same format. The fact that such features as say, leaf colour, size and shape are all dealt with in the same order using the same agreed range of descriptive terms may seem obvious, but is sadly lacking in most other books. This makes identification so much easier. The acid test, of course, lies in actually attempting to identify some plants: this I did. Of the eight plants selected (1 fern, 3 conifers, 2 hostas, 1 *Iris* and 1 *Allium*) four came straight through the key to the correct solution, three came to the wrong solution but this was immediately obvious after reading the description: a second attempt was successful in each case, and the last specimen took four attempts but eventually was successful. From this, I rate the keys as very good.

Criticisms are few: the first does not concern the authors or format, it is the cost. This is a first rate work that is greatly needed and has the potential to become a standard reference work. Sadly this will not be the case since vol. I alone has a price tag of £55. The second is unavoidable in a work principally to be used for the identification of unknown plants. The layout by family is logical and necessary to fulfil the stated objective, however, most horticulturists are used to an alphabetical layout by genera in plant reference books. Old habits die hard and it may take some time for many to adjust to a different way of thinking. The last two criticisms are far less important: I don't like the way that cm and mm have been mixed within descriptions such as perianth-segments 1-1.5cm x 4-8mm'. The last is even more subjective: the cover is boring.

Overall this is a very good book which deserves to become accepted as a standard, classic reference work, the authors and editors are to be greatly congratulated.

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