Of the old “pot herbs” the book includes only carrot and celery; no turnip, no onion, although garlic and chives are there, and mirepoix is included in the flavoring mixtures.

Allen has done extensive research into plants used for flavoring in cuisines around the world, many of them little known outside their immediate region. For several of these he can only record the minimum, but this may encourage culinary travelers to seek out these and other, as yet, unknown flavorings. I recently came across buchu in South Africa, an indigenous garrigue-like plant, smelling pungently of pennyroyal backed by citrus notes, with a bitter taste. It was used, in a tiny quantity, to flavor well a vegetable soup. Allen refers to its use in flavoring South African wines, which may once have been true, but given the quality of South African winemaking today it seems dubious.

The flavoring ingredients of the Americas, Japan, and Southeast Asia are well documented, but those of Australia, the Indian subcontinent, and the Middle East are at times rather sketchy. The masalas of the different Indian regions are not noted, nor is sambhar powder or dhana jeera. Allen claims that “In Arabic-speaking areas of the Middle East and Africa, ras el hanout is a mainstay of every kitchen” (p.431). It is certainly widely used across the Mahgreb, but is hardly known in the Middle East; every country from Turkey to the tiniest Gulf State has its own baharat, or spice mix, simpler than ras el hanout, and often containing more chile. I cannot agree with his assertion that ras el hanout and dukka are similar. The latter is an Egyptian blend of nuts, sesame seeds, and a few spices, eaten at breakfast or as a snack, whereas ras el hanout, used to flavor tagines and other stews, has the complex flavors of some twenty or more spices, including black and green cardamom, cassia, cloves, cubeb, ginger, grains of paradise, rosebuds, orris root, lavender, and mace.

There is more to say about the use of pomegranate throughout the Middle East, from the use of the fruit in salads to the complex dishes of vegetables and meat flavored with juice or molasses, culminating in Iran’s fesenjan. Only by browsing did I come upon a brief paragraph about mastic, preceded by one on Australian black wattle (the connection is the acacia species); I did not find information on mahlab, akudjura, or the micromerias used in Balkan and Italian cooking.

There are few references to British cooking; one mentions bistort being used in Easter ledges pudding, but this herb pudding, made with a mixture of edible young wild herbs (ledges was a country name for bistort), disappeared in the first half of the twentieth century.

Allen concludes with a helpful glossary of definitions of the chemical names that occur in the text, interspersed with entries on some herb and spice mixtures and their constituents, an extensive list of sources, and a bibliography.

There is much valuable reference material in this book; it is a pity it is so frustrating to use.

—Jill Norman, author, Herbs & Spices

The Downright Epicure: Essays on Edward Bunyard (1878–1939)
Edited by Edward Wilson
Totnes, Devon, UK: Prospect Books, 2007
400 pp. $50 (60.00) (cloth)

English nurseryman, pomologist, and gastronomic scholar Edward Bunyard is relatively little known these days; to take a current measure of recognition, at the time of this writing there is not even a Wikipedia article devoted to his life and work. Yet an individual such as Bunyard represents a larger portion of the fabric of a time and place than the historical figures at the heads of parliaments and armies. Heir of a century-old family nursery in Maidstone, Kent, Bunyard was educated at home due to unspecified “poor health” and never attended university. He nonetheless came to write books including The Anatomy of Dessert and The Epicure’s Companion, as well as articles and catalog copy, and even presented work on Mendelian genetics to the Royal Horticultural Society, where he served as a member of the governing council during most of the last decade of his life. A bachelor of no recorded passional life (a refreshing contrast to the present age of oversharing), he traveled extensively on the Continent for both professional reasons and leisure, which largely overlapped; he eventually befriended members of the Bloomsbury Group, including Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West.

Even as Bunyard relished his role of gentleman scholar and latter-day Renaissance man, he witnessed economic and social changes that would make lives like his own increasingly rare, if not impossible. Acknowledging that American land-grant universities represented the future of horticultural research, and envying their resources, he resisted some of the implications of that approach, sometimes to the detriment of his business. Favoring varieties of apples and other fruits for flavor instead of yield or ability to be shipped, and avoiding the trend toward more profitable monocultures, he anticipated concerns now voiced by Wendell Berry, Carlo Petrini, and Vandana
Shiva. Bunyard consequently found himself increasingly less at home, and less prosperous, in a massifying, if more egalitarian, world. Beset by both personal and financial problems, Bunyard took his own life with a gunshot in his quarters at a London men’s club shortly after the onset of World War II hostilities in 1939.

These facts and numerous others are presented, sometimes repeatedly, in the essays that make up The Downright Epicure. Written for an audience of scholars, this collection must be taken on its own terms; it does not accommodate a general or casual reader. The accumulation of undigested facts, especially lists of titles that would have found a better place in footnotes or other scholarly apparatus, renders more than a few passages daunting. The tenor of this remotely admiring Festschrift is conveyed by accurate but hardly colorful chapter titles such as “Edward Bunyard and Literature” and “The Epicurean Context of Edward Bunyard.” The final chapter, which discusses the circumstances of Bunyard’s death, bears the almost comically distant title of “Edward Bunyard the Committee Man.”

These concerns aside, however, this volume represents a valuable compendium of information. The thirty-five-page bibliography of Bunyard’s own writings offers a ready point of departure for further investigation, as does a surprisingly brief three-page bibliography of works about Bunyard. It can only be hoped that the primarily descriptive essays in this volume, and the materials cited therein, will lead to a more comprehensive and analytical treatment of Bunyard’s career and its relation to a period of accelerating specialization in agricultural production. If we are fortunate, that treatment will be holistic, in the spirit of Bunyard’s own efforts, and accessible to a nonspecialist reader rather than pressed through the tendentious sieve of one or another body of self-referential theory.

Bunyard’s own reticence about his emotions and personal life aside, the career for which he is known continues
to invite the essential questions of biography, such as what enables a person to take up a significant role in his world and how an individual’s work is shaped by his times. Few present-day nurserymen, for instance, are likely to have enjoyed an opportunity to develop a high level of expertise in roses, in addition to fruits and vegetables, in middle age. Fewer still are likely to have undertaken the education that led Bunyard to read widely in French as well as English literature and allude to both in his own writings. (On the other hand, few contemporary nurseryman are likely to share his stated disdain for bananas as leading to laxity in taste and intellect, which was intertwined with an equally stated and—to current readers—breathtaking racism toward the peoples who produced them.) The presence of such complexities as well as such flaws suggests that more remains to be said about Bunyard, who in a 1930 letter succinctly critiques the direction of his nation: “For a memorial I shall plant an avenue of Japanese Cherries; no Cyprus for me, despite its age-long lore. No! Let us add a little to the beauty of the country; fifty years ahead it will need all we can provide” (p.73).

—J.D. Smith, author, Settling for Beauty and The Hypothetical Landscape

The Royal Garden of Pefkou: A Study of Fruit Consumption in Medieval Nicosia
William Woys Weaver
Nicosia, Cyprus: Moufflon Publications, 2006
39 pp. Cyprus £5.25
(about $13.00; paper; available from www.moufflon.com.cy)

One would think that the distinguished food historian William Woys Weaver would boast the greatest number of initial W’s in a name, at least among food authors. As it turns out, however, he’s behind William W. W. Wong.1 Weaver may, however, win a prize for the most amusingly esoteric monograph, for his staple-bound, handsomely printed pamphlet about a medieval Cypriot garden.

Best known for works on vegetables and historic American cookery, Weaver also collaborated on Food and Drink in Medieval Poland (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). While preparing that work he attended a conference in Cyprus on ethnomedical food research and discovered a significant but unexplored connection between the culinary histories of that island and Poland. “I realized that Cyprus was a key conduit to the West for foods, wines, and other aspects of medieval lifestyle,” he writes in his preface to the Pefkou pamphlet. His interest also led to an article for Gastronomica, “The Origins of Trachanás: Evidence from Cyprus and Ancient Texts” (February 2002); and will result in a forthcoming book on the wines and foods of Cyprus.

The current work concerns a brief document, a 1468 agreement of transfer of a garden in Nicosia from an Armenian-Cypriot, George of Sis, to an Arab Christian named Theodore. The garden, which was leased from the king, was called Pefkou (The Pine) in reference to a prominent tree on the property. No physical traces of the garden remain, but we know from the 1468 inventory that it contained numerous fruit trees such as apricot, fig, mulberry, and pomegranate. The booklet includes a translation of the medieval French text of the agreement, an introductory essay that places the document in its historical context, and comments on each of the fruits listed in the inventory, with discussion of how they were used in medieval Cyprus.

Weaver provides many delightful asides and excurses. We learn of a monastery named “St. Nicholas of the Cats”; of Jayme Zaplana, whose involvement in a 1473 murder resulted in the seizure of his falcons and his velvet clothes; that in gardens such as Pefkou “Cypriot nobles kept pet monkeys, caged birds and peacocks”; and that “the thorny branches of the jujube were placed in trees around ripening fruit to impale or at least discourage fruit bats, which are a serious nighttime pest in gardens all over the island.” The author also makes suppositions (“if the hunters were successful, we can assume that Papa Prokopis and his wife enjoyed some excellent game dinners”) which, although avowedly conjectural, do add color to the text.

Most interesting to me is the mention that “Sweet oranges, called portokalia in medieval Cypriot Greek, were first reported in 1433” by a monk in the marginalia of a book, and that “this is one of the earliest references to the sweet orange in the Mediterranean.” Weaver is suitably cautious in pressing the claim for primacy, but in a recent phone conversation he said, “I’m told by Byzantine food specialists that this is, in fact, the earliest mention of sweet oranges in Europe.”

Portokalia means “Portuguese fruit,” and similar names for sweet oranges have long been common in Europe. L. Ramón-Laca recently wrote, “There is general agreement that the arrival of the sweet orange to Europe was linked with the activities of the Portuguese during the fifteenth century, and particularly the travels of circumnavigation to the east carried out by Vasco de Gama….”2 But the monk’s mention in 1433 appears to precede any other.

This booklet will surely serve researchers as a source for such serendipitous discoveries and delight general readers with a taste for the arcane.

—David Karp, Los Angeles, CA