Book Reviews


This book was published as part of a series on the Huntington Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, USA. It details the extensive twelve acre Desert Garden at the Huntington. With the general public as its audience, Desert Plants discusses the history of the Desert Garden, the plants growing in the garden, and the garden’s research programs. The book is divided into four major sections: ‘A Brief History of the Huntington Desert Garden’, ‘Desert Plants of the Old World’, ‘Desert Plants of the New World’, and ‘The World of the Desert Garden’. The historical section describes the establishment of the garden, originally part of the estate of Henry Edwards Huntington, and the major role of William Hertrich in its design and construction. The second and third sections discuss different species of desert plants that can be found in the garden. Within each of these two sections the species are grouped and discussed by family or genus. Many of the species mentioned are illustrated with colour photographs and, for certain species, interesting aspects of their biology, discovery, or history are presented. The fourth section covers some of the practices and challenges of maintaining the garden, including the physical danger of working among the cacti and other spiny plants. It also highlights the importance of botanical gardens in the protection and preservation of rare species and as a genetic resource.

The author provides the reader with an entertaining tour through the garden. One can imagine oneself strolling along the garden’s paths with the curator telling anecdotes about particularly interesting plants and sharing details of the history and operation of the garden. Equally important in creating the feeling of a garden tour are the striking portraits of a wide diversity of the plants and views of many parts of the desert garden. At 128 pages long, the book includes about 250 photos, the vast majority of which are colour. Those black and white photographs appearing in the book are historical photographs showing the constructions of the garden, early views of it, and portraits of Henry Edwards Huntington and William Hertrich. The author achieves a wonderful effect, but for someone unfamiliar with the garden it could be hard to fully understand its layout from the description alone. A map with each bed labelled would have been a useful addition.

The layout of Desert Plants is quite pleasing aesthetically, but unfortunately the book suffers from some poor editing; words are sometimes left out of sentences and occasionally the subject of a paragraph is unclear. There are a few other errors, the most obvious of which is the inconsistent use of the book’s title! The correct version appears to be Desert Plants: a Curator’s Introduction to the Huntington Desert Garden, although Desert Plants at the Huntington Botanical Gardens also appears in various places.

The strongest aspect of this book is its wealth of beautiful photographs. In many ways, it is a picture book of the desert garden at the Huntington Botanical Gardens, but with the added information about each plant and the history of the garden it becomes a garden tour in book form. Desert Plants would make a great coffee table book, especially if it included a map of the garden and the copy editing was improved. The book can be recommended for those with a special interest in the Huntington Botanical Gardens, those interested in desert plants, or those with wishing to take an armchair tour through a vibrant desert landscape.

Donald McClelland


Alexander von Humboldt’s name stands supreme in the botanical exploration of tropical America. ‘He was the greatest . . . I have always admired him; now I worship him’, is quoted from Charles Darwin on the box cover of this beautiful book by Walter Lack, the former director of the Botanical Garden and Herbarium at Berlin-Dahlem. To what does Humboldt owe his reputation? He did travel extensively in tropical America, mainly in what are now Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, but his