



# A New Book From Dan Hinkley

BY WALT BUBELIS

## *The Explorer's Garden: Shrubs and Vines From the Four Corners of the World*

I knew this book was trouble as soon as I began perusing the copy I was buying at the University Book Store. I immediately was engrossed by Dan's engaging writing about plants that I already know; he writes equally well about others I have never heard of before, such as *Ovidia* or *Rhodoleia*. I find I always learn something new while reading Dan's work, so acute are his observations concerning his plant travels and his own gardening experiences.

I think there is good to be had in reading about plants that you have never heard of before. As with good fiction, you enter a new world. When visiting gardens or arboreta, I especially enjoy encountering a new plant that I have only read about before, perhaps in such volumes as this one. Dan likewise feels happy to come upon a plant previously only known to him in print—a feeling he alludes to in the book.

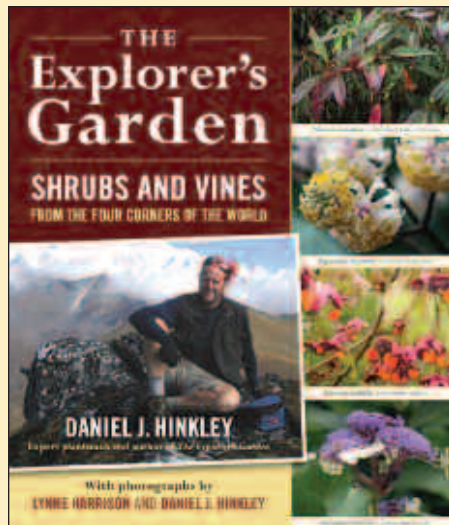
There have been many famous plant explorers, and some of them are immortalized in scientific epithets: Think of *Magnolia wilsonii*, *Acer pectinatum* ssp. *forrestii* and *Juniperus squamata* 'Meyeri', for a start. In the past, some of these explorers have written

about their travels and plant discoveries. To the delight of many modern readers, contemporary plant explorers are continuing this writing tradition, among them Peter Cox and Peter Hutchinson in "Seeds of Adventure: In Search of Plants" and Roy Lancaster in "Travels in China: A Plantsman's Paradise." But where these volumes stand mainly as travelogues of

their authors' collecting trips, Dan's new book interweaves accounts of his plant discoveries with passages concerning his attempts to grow the plants he has collected. For those readers who miss his witty, succinct plant descriptions found in the catalogs of the original Heronswood Nursery, these write-ups will similarly whet your appetite for plants you have never before consid-

ered and may not have room for, but now will want to try anyway. An excellent list of nurseries at the end of the volume will help satisfy any such cravings.

Dan always considers how to integrate into landscapes the "wild" plants he discusses. What better way to honor a foreign plant's native ecosystem—"its rightful place," in Dan's words—than to introduce it into your own garden? I rejoice in his invitation to propagate



these plants, even if it means dumpster diving (which Dan did once, to retrieve a rare cutting that had been carelessly discarded). During the time I have known him, Dan has always felt that all plants, especially the rare ones, should be shared and disseminated by gardeners. This said, he is cautious about an introduced plant's potential for becoming invasive in a new setting.

I like the way Dan discusses familiar genera together with associated genera that are found in the wild. Both require similar growing conditions, so a reader who already knows the requirements of a familiar plant can ensure its wild associate will be planted in the correct environment when added to a cultivated landscape. Readers also can emulate in their own gardens the successful plant combinations Dan has observed in the wild and described here.

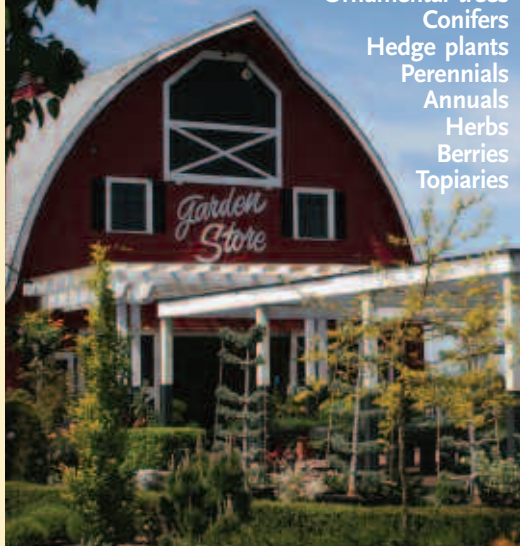
Advice on hardiness is often given with Dan's typical adventuresome spirit. Most of the plants covered in this volume are for USDA zones 7 and above. So it was a pleasant surprise, while reading Joe Eck and Wayne Winterowds' latest book, "Our Life in Gardens," to read how generously Dan shared some of his hardier plants with these gardener friends who live in Vermont (Zone 4). Regarding the subject of hardiness, there is a detailed discussion about climate limits in "Rare and Unusual Perennials," the first volume in this series.

Dan gracefully keeps you abreast of the latest taxonomic revisions, some of which are startling. *Aucuba* and *Garrya* now are compatriots in the dogwood family, for instance! For anyone having learned plant families earlier, these changes present new challenges to one's memory. Dan takes it in stride even as *Acer*, the focus of his master's thesis, is shifted from Aceraceae into the Soapwort family, the Sapindaceae. Regarding other plant names, he would prefer to keep the older term, *Mahonia*, rather than using *Berberis*. He is also brave enough to wade into the tortured taxonomy of various plants, such as

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the sterile and fertile forms of common *Hydrangea* and *Viburnum*.

The chapter on Hydrangeaceae shows Dan's ample powers of comparative observation. Seeing plants over the years, and in the extreme locales of their range, has given him a unique capability to select the very best ones for different landscape uses. In the past 50 years, the state of knowledge about this and other groups has exploded with new discoveries. I hope Dan will apply his future field research toward a much-needed update on this genus and others.

Most of the plants discussed here have photographs that are sited in the book near their prose descriptions. With a few exceptions of shots taken under trying field conditions, they are of high quality. Most are Dan's own, with impressive contributions by Lynne Harrison that often reveal the inherent artistic qualities hinted at in Dan's prose.

Examples of wry humor abound in this book. I will have to recycle in my classes, with due credit, of course, Dan's recommendation of *Clerodendrum* as useful in gardens about to be sold—a reference to their propensity to sucker. His way with words is always a delight even as he sends one to the dictionary to look up terms such as *kicksbaw*, *knackered* and *tergiversations*.

The scope of this book is remarkable, even as Dan admits to ignoring whole genera such as *Rhododendron*, *Lonicera* and *Hypericum*, to name but a few. Some of these are amply covered already by others writers, while some do not yet seem to be of interest to Dan. I suspect that his and his partner Robert Jones' new garden, Windcliffe, is a pivotal point of reference for Dan: If a plant could be grown there and would add to its ornamental quali-

ties, then he feels it is worthy of collection. Fortunately for us, these criteria encompass a vast number of garden-worthy plants.

This book records trips taken with many friends and horticulturalists, ranging from the writer Jamaica Kincaid to the eminent Welsh nursery owners Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones. Territories of exploration range from North, Central and South America to South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Europe and Asia. About the only major area not yet covered by Dan is Russia and its former satellite countries. I imagine he's biting at the bit to get to the Kamchatka Peninsula, for one.

What you will find here is a remarkable assortment of genera, including the spiny *Colletia*; the purple-fruited vine *Billardiera*; *Edgeworthia*, which is not only a source of paper fibers but intriguing for its fragrant, yellow, ball-shaped blooms in winter; and Pacific Northwest species such as *Garrya* with its winter tassels. Great depth of information is provided on such groups as the hydrangea family and *Mabonia*. Other attributes of plants are discussed, such as their edibility (or lack thereof), their fragrances and their native uses. All in all, this is a delightful book on whatever level you approach it. I find it heartening, too, that so many new plants still are being discovered. ♡

**Hinkley, Daniel J. "The Explorer's Garden: Shrubs and Vines from the Four Corners of the World." Portland OR: Timber Press, Inc., 2009.**

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