



Winners of the CBHL Literature Award

BY BRIAN R. THOMPSON

In the last issue of the “Bulletin,” I introduced the Council on Botanical and Horticultural Libraries Annual Award for Significant Work in Botanical or Horticultural Literature (CBHL) as one of the measures of greatness for books on botany or horticulture. My review profiled a few of the winners that recounted the history of plants and the people passionate about them. In this column, I’ll complete my selective review by choosing award-winning titles that profile a particular plant group and are of special interest to those who love the Arboretum.

Local Winner—Ferns

The CBHL Literature Award has highlighted the talented writing we have in Washington, as two of the winning books are by residents of the state and a third is by a long-time former resident.

I’ll begin with my personal favorite of these local treasures, “The Encyclopedia of Garden Ferns” (awarded in 2008) by Sue Olsen. Quoting myself from the awards Web site, “For those not already fans of ferns, the author’s infectious and informative style will convert...with that extra insight available only from a writer who knows her subject thoroughly.”

While addressing a global audience, this is one of the very select treasures of Pacific Northwest garden writing and must not be missed, even if you garden on a sunny, dusty slope. In addition to the expected information on cultivation and propagation, Olsen covers the natural history and taxonomy of these fascinating plants, making it of interest to more than just gardeners. The many appendices are excel-

lent, too, with the most intriguing being a collection of lists of favorite species by a global who’s who of fern specialists, whose gardens range from hardiness zones 4 to 11.

But the heart of the book is the tour of “Ferns from Around the World.” At first glance, this resembles many A-Z listings, but there are some key enhancements not often found elsewhere. Common names are listed, but these are real common names, not made up to fill a slot. The meanings of both the genus and specific epithet are given, the latter being particularly useful with ferns. The descriptions are thorough but without the mind-numbing detail of many botanic writings. And the photographs are superlative, with almost all having been taken by the author.

This is all very good, but Olsen is at her best in the “Culture and Comments” sections. This is where you can tell what she knows is from first-hand experience, and it shows her skills as a writer, too. For example, she notes that “Most *Polystichums* are considered horticulturally hardy (which means temperate rather than ‘easy’ as in some interpretations...”

Her stories will resonate with any gardener. “When my lone plant is threatened with sweeping arctic freezes, I cover it with horticultural gauze. My last carefully spread protective blanket for such nurturing was carried away by a presumably needy crow and found the following morning in the upper limbs of a neighbor’s tree. The fern survived.” And at carefully spaced moments, Olsen shares her passion: “This is THE species that inspired my interest in cultivation, propagation, and immersion in the wonderful

world of ferns.” This last sentence is in praise of *Dryopteris erythrosora*, the autumn fern.

Local Winner—Bamboo

Ted Jordan Meredith uses a similar style of engaging writing—perhaps because he is also from Washington state—in “Bamboo for Gardens” (awarded 2002). Like “Ferns,” this book is intended for a general audience, but its locality makes it a must if you’re considering using these giant grasses in your garden. While most of the photos are close-ups of their subject, it’s fun to see rhododendrons or a Douglas fir lurking in the background of wider shots.

Wherever you live, this would be an important and useful book. While there is the expected A-Z encyclopedia of species, it is unusual that the introductory material—such as culture, propagation and uses in the landscape—fills more than half the book. Some unexpected treasures can be found here, including the use of bamboo in both traditional and modern economies, and tips on eating bamboo.

You will learn, for example, that the edible shoots of *Qiongzhueta tumidissima* “are considered exceptional.” The fun continues in the encyclopedia section as we learn that this same, nearly unpronounceable species, which hails from central China, is harvested for walking sticks, and “...is the subject of history, myth, and fable in Chinese culture, dating back to at least the Han Dynasty in the first or second century B.C.”

While the author keeps the writing interesting, the more mundane information is very solid, including his discussions of how to deal with “...an attack from the demonic plant that invaded unexpectedly and ceaselessly, and could not be stopped or killed.” With the voice of experience and fondness that one might expect to be used on an errant puppy, Meredith carefully explains the different methods of containment for running bamboo.

West Coast Conifers

“Conifers of California” (awarded 2001 as Honorable Mention) is a delightful introduction

to many of our native conifers, as well as the incredible diversity of these cone-bearing trees to be found farther down the coast from Washington. Author Ronald M. Lanner writes what could be best described as a biography of each tree, telling the natural history and the interaction of each with humans and animals. While there are helpful descriptions with the photos and drawings, (including “At a distance,” “Standing beneath it,” and “In the hand”) this is not primarily a field guide.

The photographs are excellent, but a bigger visual draw are the botanical paintings by Eugene Otto Walter Murman (1874-1962), which besides being beautiful, clearly show the distinctiveness of the cones, cone scales, seeds, needles in a single bundle, and a growing tip. Adding to the history are quotes by some of the great describers of trees, including Charles Sprague Sargent, John Muir and, one of my favorites, Donald Culross Peattie.

I’m adding Lanner to this list. His descriptions of the relationship between the Clark’s nutcracker and whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*), or the unusual combinations of factors that lead to the long, long lives of the bristlecone pine (*Pinus longaeva*), are detailed and lengthy but totally engaging.

Of the incense-cedar (*Calocedrus decurrens*) he explains how forestry practices have led to a population explosion of this tree little valued by the timber industry. This is “...good for those Americans who eschew the use of greasy-inked ballpoint pens, because incense-cedar is the unrivaled champion of available domestic pencilwoods. It may not be so good for those...who must past through thickets...for those thin, dead, lower limbs seem always positioned to welt a cheek or poke an unsuspecting eye.”

Many of the more rare California conifers can be found in the Arboretum, and this book is a good introduction. Look for the Coulter pine (*Pinus coulteri*)—but don’t stand under its eight-pound cones “with talon-like appendages!—and for the weeping Brewer spruce (*Picea breweriana*) with “long, dark-foliaged, pendulous branches,” which comes from the Siskiyou Mountains.



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Briefly—Two other winners have special interest for readers of the “Bulletin.” Edward Anderson was for 30 years a biology professor at Whitman College in Walla Walla before finishing his career at the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix. “The Cactus Family” (awarded 2003) is the culmination of his life’s work as, sadly, he died shortly after publication. But more importantly, because it will be a long-time standard reference for these popular plants.

While not a gardener’s book, this provides a superb view of the remarkable diversity of cacti—well captured by excellent photographs, most by the author and many in situ. Highly recommended, too, are the chapters on ethnobotany and conservation of cacti, which illustrate how important these plants have been and continue to be throughout their range in North and South America.

Another winner (awarded 2005) is “Native Trees for North American Landscapes: From the Atlantic to the Rockies.” The sub-title is very important as trees native only west of the Rockies are excluded. But almost all trees that are included can be found in the Arboretum, and many are widely planted in our region and available in nurseries.

As the title suggests, authors Guy Sternberg and Jim Wilson address their book to gardeners and landscape designers, but there is also much here to interest those who love trees for their place in the natural landscape and how they have been interwoven with human history. Like all the award winners, the quality and diversity of the photography is impressive, and well-linked with the engaging text. ∞

Bibliography—Summer 2012

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