REVIEW

J. ARDITTI: **Fundamentals of Orchid Biology.** John Wiley & Sons Ltd., New York, Chichester, etc. 1992. xii + 691 pp. ISBN 0-471-54906-1. Price: GBP 75 (hard cover).

As stated in the preface, this book is intended as a textbook on orchid biology. Fifteen chapters treat a diverse array of topics, from physiology to ethnobotany.

In spite of its title, *Fundamentals of Orchid Biology* contains much general information that is only indirectly related to the purported subject matter. The chapter on cytology, for example, contains little which cannot be found in any undergraduate textbook on cell biology. More than one page in this chapter is devoted to the microscope used by Robert Brown, about which we learn that "it was made by the English barometers manufacturer Robert Banks (who also spelled his name *Bancks*) before 1820, and its stage is engraved with the maker's name and address – *Banks 441 Strand London*." I quote this as a specimen of the irrelevant information (others might like to call it erudition) which is found on almost every page, perhaps the most irrelevant item being a photograph of the last wife of Mao Zedong on page 50.

There is at times considerable duplication and diffusion of information. For instance, the chapter on morphology repeats much of what was already treated in the chapter on evolution (the latter hardly deals with evolution, by the way). Those interested in the morphology of orchid seeds must turn to at least three chapters. Some subjects are treated in considerable, sometimes excessive, detail; others, no less important, are only touched upon. Idioblasts and silica cells, conspicuous features in orchid anatomy, are hardly mentioned in the chapter on anatomy. At the same time, several pages are devoted to highly specialised data on *Stanhopea* osmophores.

A textbook should, in my opinion, be systematic, comprehensive, and concise. I am sorry to say that this book, to which clearly a lot of labour has been devoted, is none of the above. There is too much information which is simply enumerated, often without any sense of hierarchy as to the relative importance of the subjects presented. In the chapter on history, for example, C.L. Blume and J.J. Smith are referred to in a single sentence as "other important students of orchids in that area [Southeast Asia]." These two botanists described thousands of orchid species, yet they apparently deserve less attention than the late Mrs. Andree Millar who published a single error-ridden booklet on orchids of Papua New Guinea, for which she is here rewarded with a whole paragraph.

It is not clear for whom this book is intended. I don't think there are universities which offer a course in orchidology, but if there were I would not recommend using *Fundamentals of Orchid Biology* as a textbook. Dressler's well known *The Orchids; natural history and classification* would be a wiser choice for such a course. Subjects like physiology, cytology, heredity, etc., can be taught much better from specialised works. This book is a goldmine of facts, but the task of extracting the gold from the rock should not have been left to the reader.

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