

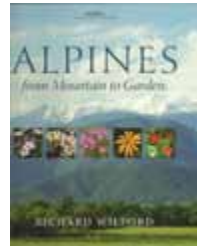
Alpines from Mountain to Garden

Richard Wilford

260 pages, over 300 colour photographs, 31 colour paintings & 8 maps

ISBN 978 1 84246 172 3

Kew Publishing, £29



Could this be the book we have been looking for? Beautifully produced, packed with fine pictures of plants and their habitats; the sort of book that we could leave on our coffee table, knowing that our visitors would be captivated. They would spend the rest of their lives looking at and growing alpines, and so would share the enormous pleasure we have had. It was such a book (although a poor thing by the standards of this one) that tipped us over the edge many years ago.

Richard Wilford is collections manager for hardy plants for display, at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. With a particular interest in alpines and bulbs, he has outstanding knowledge of the sorts of plants we love to grow in our rock gardens and in this book he has shared some of that knowledge and enthusiasm with us.

The scope of his project is ambitious. He sets out to present the geography, history, and cultivation of alpine plants. However, after a brief introduction, the account of growing alpines is only about two and a half pages of text, so is not of real practical value. So why is it there? Probably as a vehicle for showing some lovely pictures of the way alpines are grown at Kew; if that achieves one of his aims, inspiring other people to grow them, then we should be happy. It would have been nice had he recognized that Kew is not the only place to see well-grown alpine plants!

After these two short chapters, the rest of the book is structured by region, making the good point that mountains are to be found world-wide. The regions are more or less the six continents (excluding Antarctica), but with Asia divided into Japan, China & the Himalaya, and Western & Central Asia. The chapter on Europe, for example, runs to thirty

pages, but about eighteen of these are photographs, a map and diversions from the main text - of which more in a moment. That leaves about twelve pages for text - pages that are packed, and I mean packed, with information. We read about the ranges of mountains and about an astonishing range of plants; the index to the book lists well over a thousand of them. We read about the plant hunters who introduced so many of them to our gardens. We even read that the modern-day plant hunter can see these plants 'armed with no more than a camera, a notebook and a stout pair of walking boots'. Really? Shouldn't one take at least a pencil and a pair of trousers? And this chapter alone has nearly fifty photographs. Those of plants are generally excellent but those of habitats or more widely of mountain scenery are often too small, and many lack contrast. Most are unattributed, so presumably are Wilford's own, and it appears that the others were provided by a single colleague. Perhaps it would have it been better to have used material from a wider range of contributors.

Another theme has been woven cunningly through this extensive material. The publisher, Kew Botanic Gardens, also publishes Curtis's Botanical Magazine, which since 1787 has described plants new to cultivation, illustrated by exquisite paintings. Over thirty of these are reproduced in this book, each on its own page, with an account of the plant's occurrence in the wild, introduction, and cultivation. In the chapter on Europe, we are treated to accounts of *Gentiana acaulis*, *Saxifraga burseriana*, *Androsace pubescens*, *Anemone blanda* and *Crocus sieberi*. There are also special pages devoted to silver saxifrages and cushion plants.

There are few typographical problems or errors of fact, and the taxonomy is up-to-date. Given the vast amount of information, this is a commendable achievement. But perhaps therein lies the problem. Is there information overload? Do I really need to know that 'the rarely cultivated, monotypic genus *Japonolirion* ... is usually placed in the same family as *Helionopsis* (Melanthiaceae) but more recently has been moved to Petrosaviaceae, an eastern Asian family of only two genera, the other being *Petrosavia*'?

If I want encyclopaedic information, in the modern world I search the web and consult books that deal with a limited range of plants, perhaps just one genus. So this book cannot be a work of reference; its scope is too wide. I enjoyed reading it, but I doubt whether there are many people who are sufficiently addicted to alpine plants to follow my example and read it from cover to cover. So who is it for? I think the solution is to place it on your coffee table, allow your guests to browse until they have caught the bug, and then call them through to dinner.

David Rankin