

BOOKS

Judith Leet

Bulbs by John E. Bryan. Timber Press, 1989. 2 volumes. 451 pages. 750 colored photographs. 110 colored plates. Hardcover. \$120.

The Random House Book of Bulbs by Roger Phillips and Martyn Rix. Random House, 1989. 255 pages. Colored photographs. Paperback. \$21.95.

Two new books on bulbs have recently appeared, one a completely handsome, deluxe two-volume set titled *Bulbs* by John Bryan, with a jacket photograph of the Keukenhof Gardens in Holland—the tulip beds beckoning the reader to open the book. The other, *The Random House Book of Bulbs* by Roger Phillips and Martyn Rix, edited by Brian Mathew, is—on close inspection—a revised edition of a book titled *The Bulb Book*, originally published in England in 1981 by Pan Books. It is a serviceable, affordable paperback, with a much less inviting cover of assorted cut flowers produced from bulbs, with a *Fritillaria imperialis* in the center.

In heavily illustrated books, such as these, most readers probably study the photographs and captions before examining the text. In Bryan's encyclopedic two volumes—a ten-year effort—the high-quality photographs show each species in peak condition either in its wild setting or in a garden (photographs are interspersed with full-page historical botanical plates from *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*). A remarkably high percentage of the 750 photographs not only offer essential information about the plant but are aesthetically pleasing.

Authors Phillips and Rix, however, rely on "laid out photographs" in which they take four or five cut flowers, place them on a neutral background, and shoot a full-page illustration. At times the visual information is useful (particularly those that show the uprooted bulb), but at other times, the effect is of limp foliage

and flaccid flowers. These pages, fortunately, are supplemented by many fine, albeit smaller, habitat photographs often taken in remote locations.

I admit to a personal bias against the "laid out" photographs: since the plants are lined up left to right and cast shadows against the background, the photographs strike me as a lifeless, artificial way of presenting flowers. For aesthetic considerations, I find myself more attuned to Bryan's approach.

As to the texts, both books attempt to deal with bulbs on a large scale—from the most common to the rarest bulbs of the world. Phillips and Rix offer a concise and knowledgeable survey of the better-known plants whereas Bryan presents the broadest possible coverage of the subject, his treatment by far the more detailed. Bryan has arranged his two volumes alphabetically by genus, a scheme that is generally convenient and workable—and one that does not require repeated trips to the index. Even more helpful, he introduces each new genus with a brief general discussion so that the reader has a sense of how all the species fit into it. This introductory discussion I very much miss in the Phillips and Rix book, which is organized by sequence of bloom, and the reader moves from a discussion of a *Narcissus* species to a *Tulipa* species without any warning or introductory text—not even a heading.

In fact, in the Phillips and Rix scheme, all the species of a genus may not be discussed together; the reader may be surprised to come upon *Narcissus poeticus* after many pages on tulips, separated from all the other *Narcissus* because of its later blooming time. Similarly, the reader may not realize a few *Fritillaria* appear pages ahead of the ninety or so species that are clumped together.

For those who want it, Bryan goes into a brief explanation of the broad divisions of the

larger genera—*Crocus*, *Dahlia*, *Lilium*, *Narcissus*, and *Tulipa*—which helps put these familiar but potentially confusing groups into some perspective. No matter how large the genus, Phillips and Rix give their readers only short successive descriptions of individual species, and readers must make whatever sense they can of the list, quite daunting when there may be pages of entries for a given genus. For clarity of organization and of index, my choice is Bryan, although I can see where some gardeners may find it useful to see the blooming sequence and learn what plants are available in the months when their gardens need livening up. Bryan follows his introduction of each genus with sections on Culture, Propagation, Pests and Disease, and Uses.

And probably most useful of all for both the gardener and the bulb collector, Bryan then makes a selection of the most recommended species in each genus—taking full responsibility for the choices—and describes each of his choices briefly. He concludes with an often lengthy list of nonrecommended plants, either not available commercially or not garden worthy. Although Bryan allows that he has not included in his two volumes “all known varieties and species,” he has assembled a vast, mind-boggling number (230 genera), including many newly discovered bulbs, particularly from South Africa, as well as many that may be potential raw material for hybridizing.

For those who consider themselves beginners, both books presuppose little knowledge; all the basics are explained or reviewed, including what a bulb is and where each species is native. Bryan’s definition: “Almost all bulbous plants have a common characteristic—a dormant period,” brought about by either heat and dryness or cold and snow; and he includes true bulbs, corms, rhizomes, and tubers as falling under the general term *bulb*. Phillips and Rix also allow their wide definition “to include all plants which form swollen underground storage roots or stems to survive the dry or cold season.”

Both books take up all the bulbous plants that are true favorites of the garden, as well as exotic and unusual bulbs that the reader may or may not have seen. Especially noteworthy are the hundreds of rare bulbs that Bryan singles out for attention. Of *Sparaxis tricolor*, he comments: “a plant of outstanding garden merit”; of *Spiloxene capensis*, “well worth a place in the rock garden . . . where it will not fail to give you pleasure”; of the genus *Homeria*, “good plants for the sunny border where the unusual forms and colors can be appreciated.” Phillips and Rix do not offer enough of these evaluating comments on the merits of the plants; with so many thousands of species and cultivars to choose from, the gardener needs guidance from and the insights of experts.

Interestingly, *Fritillaria* is singled out for description many more times in Phillips and Rix, with over 95 species warranting entries, whereas Bryan considers only 25 species garden worthy. But which of the 95 do they recommend? Bryan’s comment on *F. michailovskyi* is far more pungent, “a favorite of those that know the genus,” than Phillips and Rix’s: “The dead petals remain around the seed capsule.” Bryan’s pithy evaluations are what make the lengthy lists of plant species come alive. In passing, Bryan makes an amusing comment on human destructiveness of species: “Dr. Boussard who took this picture in the wild [of a beautiful *Iris cycloglossa*] in Afghanistan, reports that it dislikes being run over by Russian tanks.”

All in all, we are comparing an economy model—a small compact that does the job—with a luxury model, for those who want to travel in comfort, beauty, and style. The average gardener will be satisfied with the Phillips and Rix; the ardent gardener will want the Bryan—no question about it. The insatiable gardener may want both.

Judith Leet is associate editor of *Arnoldia* and wrote the text for *Flowering Trees and Shrubs: The Botanical Paintings of Esther Heins* (Abrams, 1987).



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