Books

Jennifer Quigley


This year has brought us two encyclopedic references on the cultivation and characteristics of the plants that grow in modern American perennial gardens. Both books are impressive and authoritative works, resulting from the authors' years of experience with herbaceous plants, yet the two works stand quite distinct from each other and will serve different audiences. Assuming that one or the other belongs in every gardener's library (since it is time that we all had a reference as up-to-date as the nursery catalogues we receive), which book belongs on your shelf?

If you want lavish color photographs, Clausen and Ekstrom will most likely be your choice. More than three hundred and fifty of them, many full page, appear in the text. Regrettably, the quality of their reproduction is highly variable, and the selection of illustrations is sometimes questionable, as in the case of _Diascia stachyoides_, which receives only a passing mention in the text: "D. flanaganii, a fine plant indeed, is no longer considered distinct from _D. stachyoides_"

Armitage, on the other hand, has relegated a selection of ninety-six color plates, none larger than two-by-three inches, to the center of the book. The text contains instead the delicate line drawings of Bonnie L. Dirr, whose work also graces her husband Michael Dirr's _Manual of Woody Landscape Plants_.

The authors have also chosen different approaches to the information presented. While Armitage is limited in his selection of genera, he covers each in great depth. His discussion of each genus includes a "Quick Guide" comparing height, flower color, and other characteristics in a tabular format, a "Quick Key" to the species covered, and a listing of specialized references, including journal articles.

He provides detailed information concerning propagation methods, whereas Clausen and Ekstrom have chosen to use a single-letter code to identify the methods used. Clausen and Ekstrom present a wider range of plants than Armitage, although as a New England gardener, I must note that about 30 percent of the genera they include contain no species hardy beyond Zone 7. While Armitage covers fewer of these less hardy groups (something of a surprise since he gardens in Zone 8), he has included many bulbous species not found in Clausen and Ekstrom.

Armitage's hardiness ratings are more conservative than those of Clausen and Ekstrom, varying by at least one zone in at least one direction on most entries. _Achillea grandifolia_, an extreme example, is listed by Clausen and Ekstrom as hardy in Zones 10 to 3 and by Armitage in Zones 5 to 8.

Clausen and Ekstrom have included listings of nursery and seed sources, specialist societies, and display gardens, which will be helpful to the gardener seeking plant material or information, although they are not cross-referenced to appropriate plants. Both books include glossary, bibliography, common name index, and hardiness zone map. Although I found Armitage's common name index, which refers to page number, easier to use than Clausen and Ekstrom's, which refers to
botanical name, I found the colors of Clausen and Ekstrom's hardiness map easier to read (despite printing errors, which left some sections of the map colorless) than the varied hatching in the Armitage.

The big difference between these references, however, is in the discussion of the plants themselves. Clausen and Ekstrom describe *Heuchera micrantha* var. *diversifolia* 'Palace Purple' as follows:

> ... has bronze leaves, beet red beneath, with a wrinkled surface. A superb foliage plant selected by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Readily available.

Armitage says of the same plant:

> 'Palace Purple' ('Powis Purple') is one of the finest introductions in recent years. The ivy-shaped foliage is deep purple but the color is deeper in the spring and fall, fading to bronze green under hot summer conditions. The flowers are of little consequence and should be removed. There is a good deal of variation in depth of color and those with the darkest reds should be propagated vegetatively. A number of southern nurserymen . . . are actively selecting for richness of color and performance in the South. Opinions differ as to its origin and taxonomic niche. Some argue that it was selected from plants at Powis Castle in Wales while others claim it to be the result of a chance seedling at Kew Gardens, England. It has been listed under *H. micrantha* var. *versicolor*, *H. m. var. diversifolia*, *H. micrantha*, and *H. americana*. Regardless of birthplace or pedigree, it is an eye-catching plant worth trying at the front of the shady garden.

Clausen and Ekstrom, respected New York horticultural lecturers and design consultants, have produced a more beautiful volume and cover a wider range of plant materials, appealing to the adventurer in every gardener. Armitage, an associate professor of horticulture at the University of Georgia, has presented a more scholarly discussion peppered with personal observations, addressing those whose interest extends beyond the perennial border to research and production.

Both books have limitations, and both have strengths; each will have missed at least one of your favorite plants. The choice of which volume belongs in your library is your own, although I expect that many will find both indispensable. Rest assured that whichever treatment suits your style, you will not give the book time to gather dust on the shelf.

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