

## BOTANY

**The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Trees. Second Edition.**

By David More and John White. 2013. Princeton University Press, 41 William St., Princeton, NJ, USA, 08540. 832 pages, 49.95 USD, Cloth.

What an interesting book this is, both beautiful and enigmatic. Not only that, unusual for a tree book, it includes discretely tiny animals. The North American edition of a European book, it is built around David More's quest to record with paintings all the tree species found growing in British Isles. Of course, that would constitute some native species, but very many more imported by collectors from elsewhere. As John White explains (assuming he is the author of all the text), while North Americans are blessed with a huge diversity of tree species, the differing ice age glacial patterns of the two continents mean that Eurasia has many fewer species but very wide east-west distributions. Perhaps to make up for it, Europeans have been eager plant collectors, so Britain and Ireland now have more diversity of tree species than any other similar-sized, temperate land mass. A good section of the introduction is devoted to the plant collectors of past centuries.

The book covers trees of the northern temperate zone, more or less, including species from all around the northern hemisphere plus a few from the south that can survive in the north. The scope is really defined by what can be grown successfully in the British Isles. There is a heavy focus on growing trees ornamentally, and cultivars are covered along with species, subspecies and varieties. Here is where the enigma comes in. I can't decide if this book is something that is trying to be

something else. I kept looking for some sort of further explanation in the text, but never found it. There is some kind of missing link to add more sense to the reasoning for a North American edition. It looks like it's going to be an encyclopedia of wild trees in their native landscapes, or, at least, that is what I was expecting. However, it is really aimed at people who are selecting and growing trees. Or is it? Maybe it really is legitimately meaning to straddle both. Maybe it's just my North American perspective that wants a dichotomy. Perhaps if I'd lived my life in a place like England where most of the tree cover had been heavily managed and modified by humans for so much longer, the distinction would be irrelevant. Maybe it is irrelevant anyway. In North America I have the idea that there are urban forests composed of some native species and many not native, and many naturalized. Then I think there are wild forests where the species composition, at least, has not been manipulated. It would seem strange to blend the two into one book. But where is that pure, wild forest, really? All over North America, forests (including those lower than your ankle) have been changed by forestry, earlier clearing and other human influences.

The other part of the enigma comes from my librarian-like feeling that all books must be placed within a known category. This one is called an encyclopedia, and I'll grant it that. But somehow the basis for what

trees are included is not systematic enough for me to feel really comfortable with 'encyclopedia'. It is a more like a curated collection. Really, it is a huge arboretum tucked between covers as long and broad as a sheet of letter paper and as deep as, perhaps, an old-fashioned pencil eraser. It is not a field guide (it doesn't claim to be) where you know you are getting wild, native trees, at least for the most part. It is not a regional overview based on natural geography. It is certainly much more than your average guide to trees and shrubs in horticulture. It is nothing like the manual for growing woody plants in my library, either, for that book's purpose is 100 percent guidance and instruction. This book's purpose is ultimately, I believe, to stun one with the wonder of trees, which it does.

To give an idea of the details provided for each tree species, here is what is included in the account for Eastern Hemlock (*Tsuga Canadensis*): it's appearance including how it differs in the wild and in cultivation; its native range; where it is hardy, both latitude and altitude; the many cultivars developed from the species since 1736; it's expected height in 10 years, 20 years and eventually; hardiness given as a percentage of tolerance to frost ranging from 0% at the freezing point to 100% at -40 degrees C or F (-40 being the point where Celsius and Fahrenheit are the same); a number code indicating choice considerations for gardens and where applicable a number code for the quality of the wood for use.

The illustrations are finer than any I've seen; certainly more realistic and precisely captured than in any of the tree books in my library. They are gorgeous and comprehensive, with lots of time given to small details,

cross-sections of conifer needles, summer and winter views, close ups of leaves, leaf scars and buds, twigs, cones, fruit, bark, flowers. This is unquestionable talent driven by passion.

The secretly charming little bit I didn't even notice until I'd looked through the book a few times is the use of life figures for scale. These range from birds (lots of magpies and hawks) to weasels, foxes, deer, pet dogs, cattle and people. For a few moments I forgot about the trees and flipped through looking for the tiny creatures. They're not on every page, and I admit to being disappointed when there isn't one.

Like in some arboreta, the species are arranged taxonomically. There are no keys, just titles and a table of contents filling the role of sign posts. To use this book for identification purposes you will first need some idea of what type of tree you are looking at, and then you will have to browse. The introduction makes a solid read on its own, with lots of interesting information about tree distribution, collection and growing.

I recommend this book for any tree lover, especially one who hankers to roam, tree by tree, across the northern temperate world. If you took the time to gaze each day at one of its pages, you would have a handy substitute for getting out of doors to look at live trees. If you are plotting your own arboretum, or just to plant a new tree in your yard or garden, this book will help you too. If you've got the cash, I suggest the hardcover version, because it's a big book. The Princeton University Press online catalogue only showed the cloth cover version when I checked today (October 2, 2013).

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