When this book landed on my desk, my first thought was: ‘How nice that we now have an illustrated monograph on this fascinating genus’. After examining it more closely, I thought ‘What a wasted opportunity’.

Over a period of many years, AJM (‘Toon’) Leeuwenberg has headed a team at Wageningen Agricultural University in producing monographs on genera in the family Apocynaceae. This family is one of those having a disproportionate number of interesting species, and each new one of these mostly excellent publications was eagerly welcomed by the plant taxonomical community. They were not cheap, but personally I acquired several which now are valued items in my library.

So many of the groups treated are really of interest to more than just the plant taxonomist. Monographs published by institutions tend not to be very widely distributed outside professional circles, firstly because these institutions do not always market their products aggressively, secondly because these works are produced for the specific use of plant taxonomists and thus often are not attractive to the non-taxonomist, and thirdly because these small print runs are in many cases expensive compared to commercial productions. Perhaps for these reasons, this latest contribution in the series (no. 48) was given to a commercial publisher to publish, with the addition of some colour photographs, a hard cover, and a pictorial dust jacket to lend it more popular appeal.

This book is presumed based on a thesis by Rapanarivo (a native of Madagascar where 18 of the 23 species occur) under the leadership of Leeuwenberg. A chapter on cultivation was written by Röösli, a grower in Zürich with much field experience in Madagascar. It is unclear what Lavranos’ contribution is; apart from ‘essential inputs from the plant explorer’, ‘ecological inputs [from Africa]’, and ‘Lavranos and Röösli made most of the excellent photographs’ (page vii), his contribution is not acknowledged. My guess is that he had very little to do with the book, in spite of being listed as second author, because the book shows none of his enthusiastic and entertaining style.

There are three chapters, an index of exsiccateae, and an index of scientific names. There is no general bibliography where one would expect it at the end of the book, but both Chapters 1 and 2 have mutually exclusive bibliographies which does not make the book any easier to use.

Chapter 1, attributed to Rapanarivo and Leeuwenberg, is titled ‘Taxonomic revision of Pachypodium’. It starts, rather incongruously, with an abstract, followed by a half page history of the genus, and less than a page of geographical distribution which is exceedingly dull reading because there is no synthesis or analysis and it merely states the general distribution of every species — information which really should be with the treatment of individual species. There is just less than two pages of morphology which is superfluous because it is a mere paraphrase of another full and formal generic description just two pages further on. It also contains some absurdities: for instance, under the heading wood is merely stated ‘The wood of Pachypodium is cream-coloured and soft’, and nowhere is anything said about the anatomy of any organ. Then there is one page concerning relationships with other genera which is not very informative at all, being merely an exposition of morphological characteristics without any mention of molecular or chemical data, the latter surely of considerable importance in this family. A cladistic analysis by Sennblad of some Apocynaceae, including two species of Pachypodium, is very briefly mentioned, but why was it not reproduced for the benefit of the interested reader? A glaring omission is the lack of any information on relationships or similarities within the genus, which would have been particularly appropriate given the geographical occurrence of the genus in both Africa and Madagascar, and a parallel series of growth forms in both.

The taxonomic treatment commences with a generic bibliography and type citation, followed by a very detailed generic description and a key to the species. The treatment of the species is similarly dour: bibliography, synonymy, citation of type; a detailed description (on average a page long), an almost useless sentence on distribution (typically ‘Endemic to Madagascar’), little more than two lines on ecology, vernacular names, and a list of specimens examined (including specimens in cultivation). There are also notes which typically contain habitat information which would have been better placed under ecology (and at any rate are treated in the next chapter), and something like ‘P. gracilis is easily confused with P. cactipes and P. rosulatum’ The three species are distinguished mainly by the characters given in number 16 and 17 of Key 2. The taxonomy seems to be sound enough. In the case of Pelargonium rosulatum Baker the
authors propose to conserve the name over *P. horombense* Poisson, with a new type, and published a proposal to this effect in *Taxon* 48: 181 (1999). It is unfortunate that this matter had not been resolved before publication of the book. Because the authors also accept the name *P. horombense*, it seems to me more appropriate to follow Art. 14.9 of the *International Code of Botanical Nomenclature*, conserving the name with a new type against its original application, and attributing the name not to Baker but to the first author to use it in its currently accepted context (in this case, Poisson in 1924). For every species there are one or more colour photographs which are usually some pages distant from the relevant text, and a distribution map with the text. For 15 of the species there are plates of line drawings which are in general very nice and detailed, but their reproduction varies from excellent (Figure 6) to truly awful (Figure 3). The ‘line drawings’ of three of the African species appear to have been reproduced from bad photocopies of the watercolour paintings in *Flowering Plants of (South) Africa*. Incredible as this may sound, these species are treated in alphabetical order, first the Madagascar species and then the African species. This makes comparison of closely related or similar species almost impossible, and defies the prime aim of a taxonomical treatise.

Chapter 2, attributed to Rapanarivo, deals with *The habitats of Pachypodium species*. It briefly treats the genus in respect of its spatial distribution, altitude, temperature extremes, precipitation, number of dry months per year, associated vegetation types, substrate including soil pH, and descriptions of the habitat of every species. My personal inclination would have been to include the individual habitat descriptions under the species treatments, and the rest perhaps in the introductory paragraphs at the beginning of Chapter 1. This very boring chapter bears absolutely no comparison with Lavranos and Röösli’s informative, well illustrated, and eminently readable article, *The habitats of Pachypodium in Madagascar*, which came out in two parts in *Cactus and Succulent Journal (US)* 68: 177–195 (1996) and 71: 4–22 (1999).

Chapter 3, by Röösli, concerns the *Cultivation of Pachypodium*. This author collected seed of all the species in habitat, which enabled him to assess the natural situation and apply this to growing the plants in Europe. As such his contribution is very valuable and will certainly save more than one cultivated plant from disaster. I am less happy with the presentation of the data on individual species: it commences with irrelevant references to illustrations in this book, followed by *distribution, habit, and ecology*, all old news by now. Then follows the valuable *cultivation*, and *lastly reproduction* which in every single case but one is ‘by seeds’, the exception being *P. bicolor*, ‘by seeds and cuttings’.

Surely the book would have been far easier to use had this chapter also been merged with Chapter 1.

The book ends with an *Index of exsiccate*, which I like except that no holding herbaria are cited (in fact, why couldn’t the lists of specimens examined have been omitted from Chapter ?); and finally there is an *Index of scientific names, of Pachypodium* and of associated species.

The book looks very similar to previous volumes in the series, down to page size, lay-out, and type face. The paper is uncoated in this volume, and the binding is excellent and in linen with a glossy pictorial dustjacket.

Why then am I ungrateful? Surely it contains all the sort of information which we have come to expect from the *Series of revisions of Apocynaceae*, plus more in the form of colour photographs and information on cultivation? That is quite true. However, firstly, the book lets down the professional botanist through omission of information which we have come to expect at this stage. Secondly, the book is plain badly designed. Thirdly, while aiming at both the professional botanist and the amateur enthusiast, the publisher completely misjudged the needs of the non-professional and offers a visually singularly unattractive product. While this book had the potential of being a commercial success, I can see it gathering dust on booksellers’ shelves if a more inspired account of the subject comes out tomorrow.

**P Vorster**
Botany Department, University of Stellenbosch, Private Bag X1, 7602 Matieland, South Africa
e-mail: pjvor@akad.sun.ac.za