Book reviews


Since the original publication of this book in 1995 the awareness of plants in our environment has escalated due to factors over which we have little control; an increasing population; climate change and food shortages. There is now a much greater appreciation of the richness of our floral biodiversity and the “green gold” locked into our flora. Personally I find it significant that we have an equal richness locked into the weeds found in South Africa. There are actually enormous numbers of people, millions of rand and vast tracks of land attached to problem plants in this Country. The problem is also a creator of employment and opportunity for very many of our citizens. Alien plants, while considered detrimental to our natural vegetation, also have many positive functions in our everyday environment. It is also not only aliens that become weeds, as the author clearly outlines. Due to incorrect land use many indigenous plants must now also be classified as weeds. A large number of alien plants are now also part of folklore and are used in traditional medicine.

The study of weeds, their control and eradication, and uses are fascinating areas to investigate. This book produced by the author is a valuable update on earlier editions. The information it contains is very valuable to all plant scientists no matter their field of specialization. The book is beautifully illustrated and contains information on the plants distribution, their origin, areas where they have become invasive and the impact it is having, economically, ecologically and how they are best controlled.

This book, which is also available in Afrikaans: “Probleem-plante en Indringeronkruide van Suid-Afrika” should be on the shelves of all Plant Scientists and Libraries of Higher Learning Institutions. School libraries will also benefit having copies available to pupils.

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Landscape Design for the Home Owner, Lynton Johnson, 2009, Briza Publications, Pretoria, South Africa. Price: R215.00, Soft cover with 118 pages and more than 320 colour photographs, ISBN: 978-1-875093-77-9, E-mail: woodpamela@telkomsa.net, Website: www.briza.co.za

This book contains 11 chapters: To begin with; Measuring up; In the mood; Scale and other design principles; A room with a view; Walls, floors and ceilings; The purpose of plants; Styles; Accessorise and personalise; Redesigning and revamping and The cost of things to come.

The Glossary defines many of the common terms used in the book and would be quite useful to readers challenged by uniquely South African words, for example: ‘bakkie’, ‘boma’ and ‘lapa’.

Unfortunately the list of Useful contacts contained in the Addendum is not much use as this information, in the form of URL addresses, would be out of date very soon however, the metric conversion table, mathematical formulae and list of common invader plants in South Africa will be more useful. There is also a brief index.

The importance of thorough planning in the initial phases of a landscape project of this nature is emphasized in the early chapters of this book to avoid costly mistakes that will have to be rectified at a later date. Producing a ‘site plan’ is essential for correct placing of important landscaping elements such as steps, driveways and swimming pools. To avoid many of the pitfalls inherent in a project of this magnitude the author discusses several novel ideas as aids in planning the garden from the inception to completion of the project.

First impressions can sometimes be deceiving and thumbing through the carefully laid out text and photographs do not give weight to all the excellent information and wisdom contained in the text, penned by the author with more than 40 years worth of experience in the trade. His introduction of a ‘mood board’ (Chapter 3, page 21) is quite a novel idea and ensures that the completed garden will be more in harmony with the home and together with the plants and the ‘hard landscape elements’, form a ‘visual collection’ of colour, form and texture that can be appreciated by all who spend some time in the garden. The layout of the book is attractive and modern and the copious use of colour illustrations on every page gives the reader much food for thought and many ideas to include in the design of the garden.

Whether a new garden is being developed from scratch or a badly planned or dilapidated one revitalized, this book is a valuable addition to the gardener or developer’s bookshelf and is highly recommended.
A fairly noticeable criticism of the Handbook of Plant Science is the absence of an article on gibberellins, especially considering the fact that the other classical plant hormones are each represented in individual articles. This provides the reader with some doubt regarding the comprehensiveness of sections with which one may be less familiar. It may well be that some errors have crept into a publication of this enormity, but more serious scholars and researchers will be able to discern cases where this may have occurred and search for information to supplement that which is readily provided in this text. On a positive note, however, the Handbook of Plant Science does cover an extensive range of plant science topics in varying degrees of detail, and as such, it does have its benefits. Indeed, although other reviewers have criticised this publication for its cost and relative redundancy (some articles may already be outdated due to rapid scientific advances), it may nonetheless be a very useful “desktop” reference to lecturers and students in any field of plant science, particularly for those who do not have access to the online ELS. For many of the more specific topics in modern plant sciences, this “hefty text” does provide a vast amount of information, and may be a very useful starting point for more in-depth discovery of many topics.

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doi:10.1016/j.sajb.2010.09.001


The “modern” use of herbal drugs is certainly not on the decline, and there is increasing attention being paid to the development and “modernisation” of the use of plants and herbal drugs in medicine—something which has been around for a very long time. This book highlights some plants used in ethnomedicine that have been scientifically validated, and provides reviews of information on herbal drugs used for antioxidant, anticancer, memory enhancing, neuroprotective, immunomodulatory, and anti-inflammatory effects. In addition, herbal drugs used for stroke, cardiovascular disorders, and erectile dysfunction are also discussed, as well as issues related to toxicity and safety.

The book comprises 21 Chapters written by a variety of international contributors, several of whom are experts in their respective fields of ethnopharmacology. The first two Chapters provide an introduction to the book, and highlight the potential of herbal drugs as sources of novel bioactive molecules, including a short overview of ancient medicinal systems and some of the main classes of bioactive molecules (alkaloids, phenolics and