

\*\*\*\*\*

### Book Review – La orquideoflora mexiquense

Eric Olsen  
herolsen@alumni.upenn.edu

**La orquideoflora mexiquense.** Dennis R. Szeszko Fabila. Toluca de Lerdo, Mexico: Consejo Editorial de la Administración Pública Estatal, 2011. 362 pp. ISBN 978-607-495-135-6.

Like orchids, the authors of orchid books can be classified into their genera and species. Some authors (*Photographicus orchidacearum*) produce visually spectacular books, full of colorful photographs of orchids in bloom, habitat landscapes, or pollinators hovering over a flower's scented lure. Others (*Physicus plantae*) catalog a region's orchids, collate data on growth or climate, or trace evolution's convoluted path. Still others (*Bardus exoticus*) tell us the stories of explorers in strange lands, quests for a mysterious plant never before seen by science, or tales of deceit and betrayal as nineteenth-century collectors seek to profit by their (or someone else's) discoveries. It is a rare author who is difficult to place in one of these three genera. Even more rare is one who fits well into all three at once.

Szeszko the photographer is both systematic and superb. Starting with the cover (Fig. 1; *Laelia speciosa*), he takes us on a visual tour of the orchid flora of the State of Mexico, the mountainous heart of the eponymous country. Within the book and its photographs are organized by ecosystem. For each of the five major forest ecosystems found in the state – coniferous, cloud, deciduous, rain, and arid – the author has included a large landscape photograph. This visually establishes the ecological setting for each of the species covered in that section. Following this introduction, for each orchid there are two, if not three, splendid photographs. Usually there is a close-up of the all-important flower occupying about two-thirds of a page. This is accompanied by another smaller photo showing the habit (form) of the plant, a detail of the habitat, or an interaction with an insect. By the time he is done, the author has photographically cataloged 150 of the 251 orchids species known in the State of Mexico. Taken together, these photographs help a reader unfamiliar with the area start to understand in a compelling, visual way the diverse forms of orchids found there. They also remind the reader that orchids are a highly successful class of plants, having colonized and adapted to a wide variety of ecological niches.

The text accompanying the photographs is no less systematic. With each ecosystem, Szeszko the scientist provides a general introduction describing the area (vegetation, climate, topography, elevation) and where it is found within the state. With each species, on a single page facing the photographs for that species, the author has a notation on etymology, population, flowering period, habitat, description, identification, associated species, conservation, and miscellaneous notes. In addition to the main species text, an attentive reader will note three graphics at the bottom of the page: one showing the flowering months, another showing humidity (relative dryness to moistness of climate), and another showing temperature (relative hot to cold; mostly based on elevation). Finally, on the facing page, nes-

ted with the photographs of the species described, there is a map of the State of Mexico. This shows the municipalities where that particular species has been reported with notations on whether or not those reports have been confirmed. In short, for each species, the author provides a highly organized, condensed summary of key information. For a reader studying a particular ecosystem or plant, this is the more useful, if plain, portion of the book.

A more general reader will find the text in the book's introduction far more engaging. This is where we find Szeszko the story-teller. The bulk of the introduction consists of a sketch of the scientific history of Mexican orchids. What may be surprising for an English-speaking reader unfamiliar with the deep roots of Mexican botany, is that this sketch starts long before the familiar great British scientific expeditions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Captain Cook's first voyage took place from 1768 to 1771; Charles Darwin's voyage on the HMS *Beagle* took place from 1831 to 1836). Szeszko's history begins in the early years after the Spanish conquest of Mexico (1517), with Fray

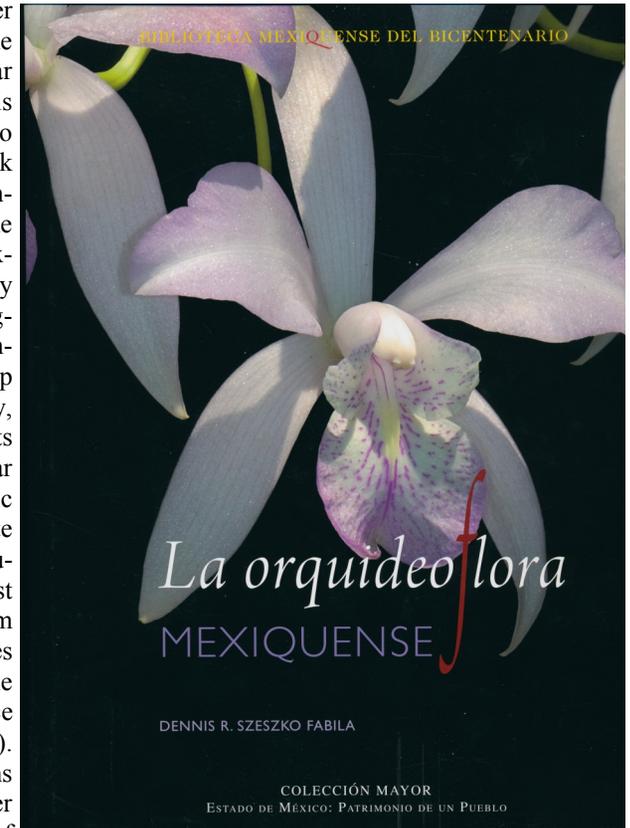


Fig. 1. Cover, *La orquideoflora mexiquense*.

Bernardino de Sahagún. In his effort to record the knowledge of the indigenous inhabitants of the area the Spanish called New Spain, the Franciscan friar recorded at least some of the many uses – medicinal, gastronomic, and ornamental – which the Aztecs had found for orchids. Later, in 1570, a physician-botanist named Francisco Hernández arrived to begin a systematic exploration of New World plants. He had been commissioned by King Philip II of Spain to write the natural history of New Spain. His expedition lasted six years, resulted in over 3,000 plant specimens being collected, and produced six volumes of natural history. Among the plants described and illustrated were six species of orchids. As late as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, another Spanish king (Charles III) funded a “Royal Botanic Expedition to New Spain”. This one started in 1786, lasted 16 years, and ranged from what is

now Mexico as far north as what is now Alaska. It was only after some three centuries of Spanish botanic explorations and studies, that English and American orchid specialists such as James Bateman ([Orchids of Mexico and Guatemala](#)), Asa Gray, and Oakes Ames made their contributions to Mexican botany. Since then, interest in and knowledge about the orchids of Mexico has continued to grow. As the author reminds us, each new generation of explorers and botanists has built on the findings of their predecessors.

There are only a couple of small disappointments with this book. First, that the author did not somehow find the time, resources, and endurance to cover every species of orchid known to be found in the State of Mexico. We can only hope that he is currently working on the remaining 101 species. Second, that readers who do not read Spanish will encounter only the photographer and miss out on both the scientist and the story-teller. These are minor quibbles, of little consequence.

This book is superb. It should grace the library of anyone interested in Mexican orchids or its history. It should also be required reading for anyone who fancies himself a modern plant explorer. After all, it is wise to remember that orchids have their dangers. As the author recounts, he had his encounters with, among others: ants, mosquitos, Africanized bees, wasps, scorpions, rattlesnakes, coral snakes, vampire bats, Dengue fever, and drug smugglers.

This reviewer looks forward, from the safety of his study, to hearing more from Dennis Szeszko (*Explorator illustris*).

\*\*\*\*\*

### Corrections to the April Issue

Three corrections to the April issue are in order. The first error is in the heading on page 2. the heading should read as follows:

The MIOS *Journal* 14(4): 2. 2013. Ferry, R. J.: Book Review Hardy CYPRIPIEDUM Species...

The second error is a typo on page 3. In the first line there should obviously be a space between *the* and *most*, but that one slipped by both your editor and his normally eagle-eyed wife.

The next item to correct is a bit more serious, and readers may well want to annotate their personal copy accordingly. On page 6, in both the text and the figure, the specific epithet is misspelled. It should read *fuchsii*, not *fuchsia*.

Your editor is slightly red-faced and apologizes for the errors. Incidentally, as this was being written, the computer automatically changed the correctly spelled word *fuchsii* into the incorrect spelling. Now the computer's red face has been corrected as well!

\*\*\*\*\*