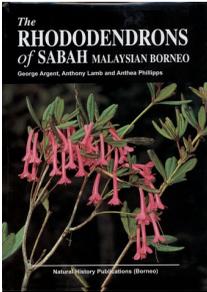


## Book review



The Rhododendrons of Sabah, Malaysian Borneo  
 GEORGE ARGENT, ANTHONY LAMB & ANTHEA PHILLIPPS  
 Natural History Publications (Borneo) in association with  
 Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh 2007  
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The original incarnation of this book appeared in 1988 as a modest, pocket-sized, softcover volume published by the Sabah Parks Trustees; one of a series of titles primarily aimed at visitors to the various parks situated within this Malaysian state on the island of Borneo. For many years it remained an elusive title to obtain in the West, although much sought after by the vireya-growing community and highly prized by those fortunate enough to secure a copy.

After nearly 20 years, *Rhododendrons of Sabah* has been re-born in full quarto hardcover glory; a revised, expanded and updated work providing the reader with a comprehensive account of the vireya rhododendrons of the region.

In the opening 'Introduction' the authors define *Rhododendron*, and in particular subgenus *Vireya*, and the distinctive traits of its members found in Sabah. Principally, these include the four types of scales found on the leaves, together with differences in the floral bracts, characters used in the identification and morphological classification of all vireyas.

The following chapter describes the different habitat types seen in Sabah, largely determined by increasing altitude, and discusses how the rhododendrons fit in to each type. This is expanded upon in the next chapter which examines the distribution of rhododendrons across Sabah, in particular along the main mountain ranges, graphically represented by four useful transect diagrams, as well as dealing with the issue of conservation.

Readers are then presented with a 'Key to the Flowering Rhododendrons of the Main Kinabalu Massif' – the most readily accessible place for those wishing to see vireyas in their natural environment. This covers the 26 species found on the mountain, including four species endemic to Kinabalu, and is followed by a complete 'Key to Sabah Rhododendrons' to enable identification of all 42 species found within the state (up, incidentally, from 35 species described in the 1988 edition).

The largest chapter in the book, at around two-thirds of the total page count, is devoted to botanical descriptions of each of the 42 Sabahan species, and follows the revision published by Dr. Argent last year – *Rhododendrons of Subgenus Vireya* (Royal Horticultural Society, London, 2006). Whilst the morphological data are, naturally, largely the same as those recorded in the earlier work, the reader will find a wealth of supplementary information, much specific to the location in which each species is found: habitat zone, microclimate, soil type, known pollinators, natural hybrids and more. All named natural hybrids are also represented along with a selection of a few of the more interesting un-named hybrids that have been found in the wild.

The book concludes with a comprehensive glossary of terms used, helpful line drawings of leaf and flower types, and several pages of fascinating scanning electron micrographs depicting scale types.

Perhaps one of the most immediately striking features of this book is the number of photo-

graphs accompanying the text; be they close-up images of flowers or foliage, plants growing in the wild or examples of habitat type, almost all are of excellent quality and of sufficiently good size to be of value to the reader. In addition, we are treated to a glorious selection of botanical illustrations, many reproduced full-page, painted by such celebrated artists as Rodella Purves and Eve Bennett. Many of the species descriptions are also enhanced with cameo portraits of the person responsible for discovering or introducing the plant.

In summary, there is much to commend this book and in many respects it combines the

best of both worlds – not only is it an indispensable reference resource providing a scientific account of the rhododendrons but also, with so many photographs and illustrations, it holds the glamour of a ‘coffee table’ publication. In either guise, the reader will without doubt regularly return to this book. This reviewer’s only gripe – it would have been an ideal opportunity to expand the content to encompass the states of Sarawak and Kalimantan, thereby including the remaining 13 species of the 55 to be found across the whole of Borneo.

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