

**Book Review:** Evans, T.D., K. Sengdala, O.V. Viengkham and B. Thammavong. 2001. **A Field Guide to the Rattans of Lao PDR**. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, U.K. 96 pp. ISBN 1-84246-009-0. Price: 15 GBP.

Rattans are one of the most important forest products in generating income for local communities, but in spite of their long history of usage, many countries still do not have books that enable rattans to be reliably identified. With the rapid rate of forest exploitation, it is critical to know which species are the most valuable, how widely distributed they are, and whether they have potential for cultivation. For this to be possible, the first step is to know the scientific name of each rattan and this is what this field guide aims to do.

This little book has taken a new direction in rattan research in producing a user-friendly guide that is attractive and easy to use by a wide range of readers from the botanists to the local forester, agriculturalist or conservationist. Solidly based on both fieldwork and scientific herbarium research, it combines a great deal of information into an attractive format. It begins with a general section on basic information on rattans, which is followed by field keys and the heart of the book, information on the 31 main species and 20 similar allied species found in Lao and the surrounding region. The book finishes with an illustrated glossary of terms, which makes the often alien structures and terminology peculiar to rattans easily understood, advice on how to collect these spiny plants, the management and conservation of rattans, and a section on planting and cultivating rattans.

Particularly useful are the novel field keys set out like a spreadsheet so that it is possible to compare several characters simultaneously rather than being confined to the usual dichotomous keys that many non-botanists find uncomfortable to use. In fact throughout the book, careful thought has been taken to explain how taxonomy works and to give helpful advice on how to go about identifying plants.

The 31 Lao species are each given a double spread that includes a colour map to show its distribution within Lao and the surrounding region, as well as the distribution of similar species, and a colour photograph of the living stem and leaf sheath. Information includes the scientific and vernacular names, key diagnostic characters and other characters to look for when identifying them, its habitat, phenology, uses, cultivation and a description illustrated by line drawings. A box entitled 'Compare' includes similar or allied species and their diagnostic characters, which provides a quick way of checking the differences between similar species. The clear layout makes it easy to see the salient characters of each rattan.

It would have been more helpful to have included the glossy in the

introductory section so that a quick glance through would familiarise the reader with the various structures before attempting identification. I also found the terminology 'equivalent, alternative names' confusing. Are these synonyms? Elsewhere the intricacies of taxonomy have been very simply explained, why not here? It would also be clearer to include synonyms in the checklist of species indicating to which species they belong.

This is really a landmark publication and it will have wider use in the neighbouring countries of Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, where similar publications are not yet available. It is also a model for other user-friendly guides for the non-specialist besides setting a new trend of involving local botanists in its production, so that the project has not only produced a publication but has also encouraged local expertise. This latter is essential if rattans are to have a future, either from the viewpoint of their sustainable production or their continued existence.

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