

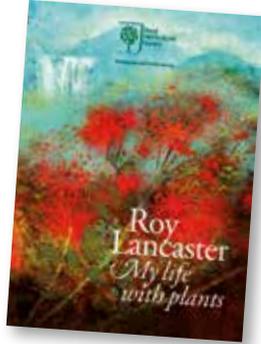
# Book Review

## My Life with Plants

Roy Lancaster

2017, Filbert Press  
in association with  
the RHS

312 pages,  
200 photographs,  
cover price £25



This attractive book, its cover a representational explosion of scarlet flowers against hinted-at distant mountains, is aptly energetic in style. It has been published to coincide with Roy Lancaster's 80th year, which might surprise those of us familiar with his enduringly youthful approach to life. As our very supportive President, he is well known to Society members, so it's good that the book's comfortable format makes it easy to settle down to read and 'hear' everything that Roy has to tell us.

The ribbon book mark is a nice touch.

Roy starts his Preface with three words: *Plants, people and places*, and these form the theme of both the text and illustrations of what is essentially an autobiography. The very readable style immediately draws us in, and it soon becomes clear that a combination of good fortune, a likeable personality, and a consistent interest in the world around him is what forms the bones of this man's life. From his youth, he impressed those he encountered with his enthusiasm and desire to learn, which of course is what brings out the best in people with knowledge to share. It is this that makes reading this book an inspiring experience.

The world features largely in this book and plants form a network of connections across the globe: as a boy, Roy found Mexican *Nicotiana rustica* growing in

Lancashire, and as a young national serviceman he found the British native *Vicia hirsuta* growing in Malaya. Wherever he is, and whatever he sees, the origins of plants and his subsequent sightings of them take us back and forth in an absorbing tale.

This is also a social history: Roy was called up for National Service towards its end; he was involved with the production of Hillier's ground-breaking *Manual of Trees and Shrubs*; he appeared on TV gardening programmes for many years; he met countless famous people from many walks of life; and he has worked closely with students who will in time make their mark on horticulture. And all these experiences are significant not just for the man himself, but also for British society during his lifetime. The story of the events of an eventful life are told in a vivid style with attention to detail (we should all have kept notebooks!) and a sense of humour.

If there is one quibble, it is that the photos, with the exception of the front and end pieces, are small, but in compensation there are a lot of them. They include many photos of plantspeople which makes this a Who's Who of the gardening world of the last sixty decades. HPS Historian, Jennifer Harmer is credited for the painstaking work she carried out in preparing many of the images for publication.

The bibliography and recommended reading sections in the Appendices are good. The index is mostly reliable, with one notable exception: the Hardy Plant Society is not in it, in spite of being mentioned in the book in connection with Roy's visit to Alan Bloom, whom he succeeded as President!

Royalties from the sale of this book go to RHS Enterprises, which supports the RHS in its charitable work. It is an appropriate gesture from a man who in his life has received much support from the world of horticulture and is himself still giving it back in large measure.

Judy Harry