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**Evaluation of a Reference Source: The American Horticultural Society A-Z Encyclopedia
of Garden Plants**

Christopher Brickell, Dr. H. Marc Cathey, eds. *The American Horticultural Society A-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants*. New York: DK Publishing, Inc., 2004. 1103p. \$80 (ISBN 0-7566-0616-0)

This large single volume provides detailed information on the practical cultivation and propagation of over 15,000 ornamental plants, from the familiar to the exotic. The book centers on varieties that will grow outdoors in the United States and in Canada, but many plants which are popularly raised indoors or in greenhouses are also included. There is, in addition, some coverage of aquatic plants. The editors-in-chief are Christopher Brickell, the former Director General of the Royal Horticultural Society, and Dr. H. Marc Cathey, the President Emeritus of the American Horticultural Society. There is a long list of contributors in the front of the volume, including a separate list of the contributing photographers. The work is endorsed by the American Horticultural Society and their name and logo appear on the cover. This is an authoritative work edited by experts in the field, and has been kept up to date: this publication is a substantial revision of the first edition, which was also published by DK Publishing in 1997. The introduction states that it includes updated species entries, new cultivars, and “new entries for vegetables, herbs, fruiting plants, and turf grasses.”

The main bulk of the Encyclopedia consists of more than 2000 genus headings, listed alphabetically by their latin botanical name, which is standard practice for most botanical references, but may be confusing for the beginning gardener. These listings include a brief description of features common to most cultivars such as appearance, climate zone, garden usage, information on cultivation, propagation, and any common pests and diseases. Following this general information, which normally spans three to four column inches, are listings for individual varieties which include more specific information for selected cultivars. These entries are surrounded by numerous, clearly labeled color photographs and drawings. While the print is small and dense, the four-column layout, consistent formatting, bold headings, and interspersed pictures keep it fairly readable.

The terminology is terse and frequently technical, as the work is aimed primarily at professional gardeners or serious amateurs. Beginning gardeners, or anyone without at least a working knowledge of this botanical terminology, will have to make frequent use of the included glossary in order to parse entries. Botanists would also be able to fully understand this reference book, but the information included is directed towards practical gardening rather than academic or scientific research.

Examining a sample entry for a common plant such as the Dahlia informs us that this genus originated in Central America and are normally grown for their blooms, that they can be propagated from seeds as well as cuttings (specific instructions are given), and covers a large number of potential pests and diseases. The book describes different classes of Dahlias, divided by size and type of blooms: illustrations are provided to enhance the descriptions. Following the general information, which fills a page, are five pages of specific variants, including color photographs of many of the popular cultivars (though these still only represent a small fraction of the

20,000 cultivars mentioned in the genus description). As another example, the entry for the popular genus *Rosa* is twenty-five pages long (the longest single entry), and contains similar information to the *Dahlia* entry. It includes illustrations of different types of blooms, descriptions of many classes of roses, detailed discussion of pruning, cultivation, and disease issues, and then a long list of specific cultivars with many accompanying photos. For popular plants such as these, the Encyclopedia provides extensive and in-depth coverage which should satisfy any reader looking for practical advice and ideas for their garden.

Less common or popular plants have much shorter and less detailed entries: the *Cyanotis* genus from the upland forests of Africa and Asia, for instance, merits only a single column entry, describing only two cultivars, and including a photo of only one of these. Even these short entries, however, can provide useful information for gardeners looking for interesting or novel options: this little known species produces purple, violet, or blue flowers, and suffers only “infrequently” from pests and diseases. The majority of the entries in the Encyclopedia are of this much shorter variety.

For those of us who are not familiar with the latin names for garden plants, there is an index of common names provided. Besides this major indexing system, there is also other material provided to help the reader to understand the layout and organization of the work: at the beginning of the book there is an extremely helpful two-page spread which describes “How to use the encyclopedia.” Besides the index of common names, which is referenced on these pages, there is information on the glossary, the maps which are provided to illustrate the American Horticultural Society heat zones and the USDA plant hardiness zones, and also the unique visual glossary located at the end of the textual glossary. This last resource was particularly helpful in providing a quick and clear understanding of some of the technical terminology used for describ-

ing leaves and flowers, however, it is not specifically referenced in the table of contents. The visual glossary is only mentioned in a sidebar on the “How to use this encyclopedia” page. This omission makes a valuable resource significantly less accessible, as many readers may simply miss it.

The introductory part of the Encyclopedia also contains several essays on general topics such as “Botany for the gardener,” “Outdoor cultivation,” “Pruning,” “Perennials,” and “Organic issues and native plants.” These essays are short and practical, all one or two pages long, and they contain many photographs and illustrations that help to clarify concepts. These sections of the book can provide general survey information on these topics, but they do not provide in-depth coverage on any of these subjects. Considering the technical nature and organization of the rest of the work, as well as its depth, these short overviews for beginners (such as “What are perennials?”) seemed somewhat out of place.

While there are a number of ways to access the material provided in this reference work, there are limitations to the organization and the indexes provided. While it is possible to look a plant up by either its botanical name (in the alphabetic listing of the genus entries themselves) or by its common name (in the index provided), plants are not indexed by any other characteristics. I can imagine that a gardener might be looking for a plant which would fill a certain need in garden design, such as one which grows 4 feet tall (but no taller) and can tolerate some shade. Finding a plant which fit these or other specific characteristics would require quite a lot of previous knowledge and expertise, or would entail simply browsing through the listings for ideas (a time consuming process). In order to better serve as a general reference for non-experts, future editions of the book would benefit from additional indexes, especially ones that organize plants by climate zones, and divide them by size or class (tree, shrub, etc).

The volume itself is sturdy and attractive, bound in a colorful hardback with a matching dust jacket. The paper is glossy and high quality, a must for the many photos it contains. It lays flat when opened at any page, and appears that it would stand up to many years of use.

As a reference on the cultivation of many ornamental plants intended for serious, knowledgeable gardeners and horticultural professionals, this is a text which is recommended for public libraries of moderate size and any special or institutional libraries with a botanical collection. I would think it would also be a valuable purchase for commercial gardeners, and other related businesses such as nurseries. Individuals with a serious interest in the subject might also consider purchasing this work, though its physical size and price make it an unlikely choice for all but the most devoted private buyers.