The Bold Dry Garden


This is not so much a gardening book as a book about a garden. It tells the story of Ruth Bancroft, whose pioneering approach to gardening in the dry Californian climate has paved the way for future gardeners. The book has four main sections. First we are told about Ruth: a farmer's wife who, during the 1950s and 60s, collected succulent plants from wherever she could, to grow under cover. The history of the garden is charted - how, by 1971, most of the farm was sold to developers, leaving Ruth, at the age of 63, free to think seriously about gardening, using plants that required no supplementary irrigation. So she began experimenting with her beloved succulents. The next section tells us what the garden has become today - one of the most striking and immerse yourself in the story of one of the world's great gardens.

Paul Spracklin is a garden designer with a particular interest in succulent gardening

Living Roofs

Ashley Penn 224pp, 2016, teNeues, ISBN 9783832732455, RRP £29.95  RHS price £23.95

This weighty book contains 35 case studies of private roof gardens from around the world. Impressively, almost all of the pages are completely covered in photographs. So far, so good, but although it is a solid and varied collection of beautiful roof terraces from around the world, there is not really anything new here. The title is slightly misleading because many of the projects are as much about the architecture as they are about the gardens but that, I assume, is the point - each complements and depends on the other for their individual success - and the photographs convey this idea perfectly. A number of projects are ones we have been teased with in other books and magazines, so it is refreshing to see them more fully explored. However, almost half the projects are in North America, which does not leave much room for the rest of the world, and London's entries are neither new nor the best it has to offer. The author claims each individual project is examined in detail, but in truth they have a brief 200-word description and a too-short plant list. Fortunately, the descriptions are often supplemented with a useful plan, sometimes a 3-D sketch and always several excellent, large photographs that convey a reasonably thorough understanding of each example.

Andy Sturgeon is a landscape designer and author

Garden Flora

Noel Kingsbury 368pp, 2016, Timber Press, ISBN 9781604695656, RRP £29.95  RHS price £23.95

An often overlooked aspect of garden plants is their role in expressing, and even shaping, human culture. This sizeable, appealing, hardbacked book is an attempt to address this omission in mainstream gardening literature. Opening with a substantial introduction, the book familiarises the reader with a number of concepts necessary to understand what comes later. The text discusses classification, ecology, life cycles and a brief history of plants in horticulture, helpfully setting the scene for the discussions that follow. The body of the work is separated into small sections, each featuring a particular genus or plant group (ferns, bamboos, and so on). Each entry opens with an introduction about the plants as they are known in the wild, including the number of species, their distribution and ecology. This tends to be rather general and perhaps does not justify the claim of the book's subtitle that it is a 'natural and cultural history of the plants in your garden'. The larger, and more valuable, part of the book deals with the plants as they have been known in cultivation, focusing on such things as history, breeding, fashion and sometimes folklore. The subject matter lends itself to lush illustration, and the images the book features have been carefully chosen and sourced. They add much to the work and include prints from old journals and nursery catalogues as well as contemporary photographs. Just occasionally photographic illustrative plates are of low resolution. This volume is an important step in gaining the appreciation for our garden plants that their cultural contribution deserves. It is a book that should be enjoyed by enthusiastic gardeners who wish to enrich their appreciation of the plants they grow.

James Armitage is RHS Principal Botanist and Chairman of Hortax