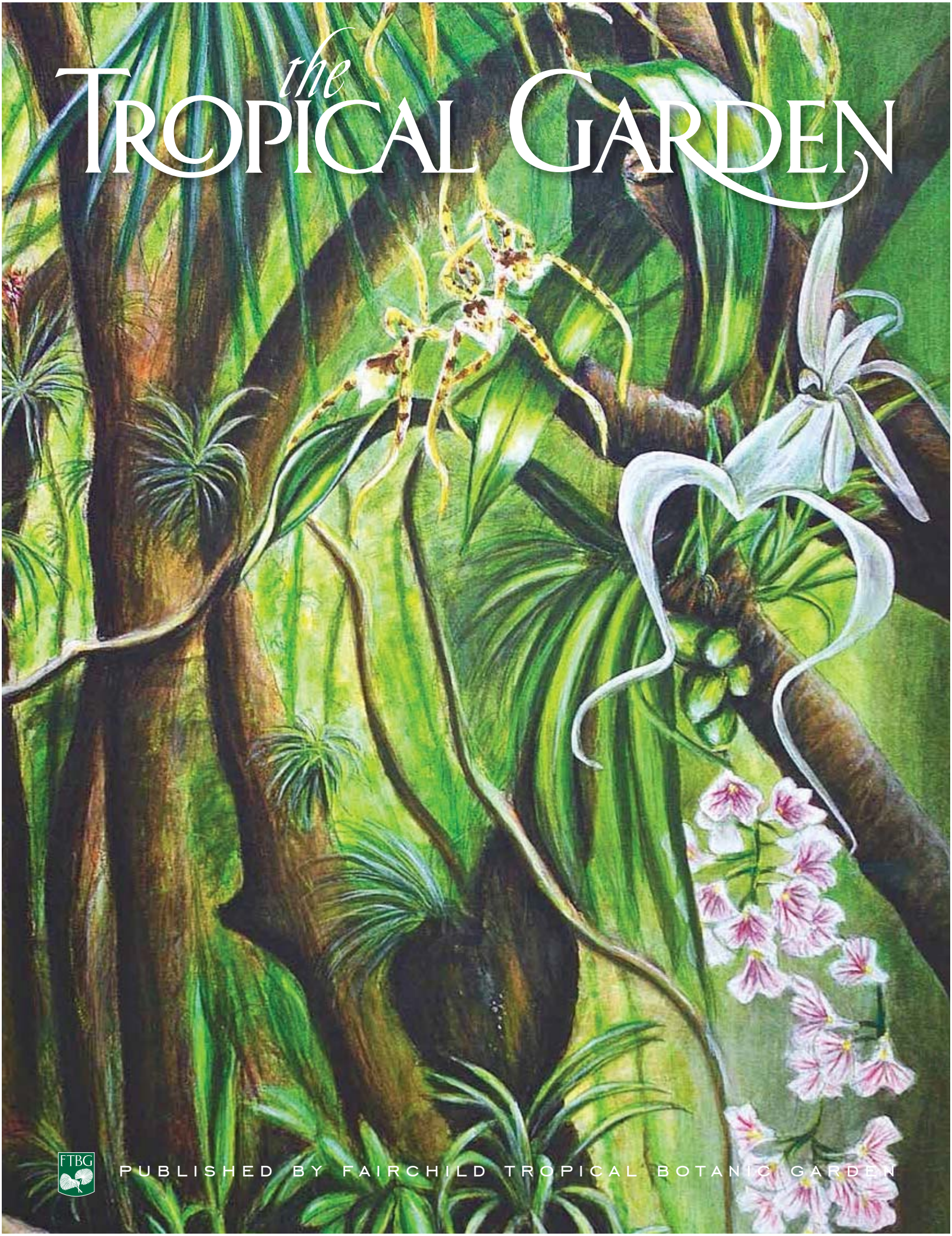
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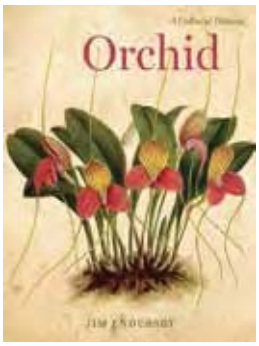

Orchid: A Cultural History

By Jim Enders. University of Chicago Press, 2016

Review by Kenneth Setzer

The title reveals the appeal of this book to a non-orchid-expert like myself. "Orchid: A *Cultural* History" (my emphasis) encompasses all that is fascinating about possibly the largest plant family on the planet, its natural history, its relationship to culture and just about every topic in between.

Endersby traces the magic and influence of orchids back to the ancient Greeks and their desire to catalog and categorize all things in nature—a precursor to modern taxonomy. Writing from a Eurocentric base, the polymath and philosopher Theophrastus, who was a student of Plato and Aristotle, worked with local orchids, having no idea about the tropics and the multitude of strange orchids they harbored. *Orchis* was the name given to the local terrestrial orchids, for the tuberous organs these orchids use to store starch and water. It means testicle, which the observers apparently thought the orchid part resembled.

From antiquity through the 16th century and later, there was a European belief that divine messages were encoded into plants, to be read by the intelligent observer. It was God's way of leading people to the proper plants to cure all sorts of ills. Called the "Doctrine of Signatures," the belief was that a plant's appearance mirrored its medicinal efficacy. Orchids, therefore, were believed to enhance male virility, or reduce it, depending on which tuber one consumed and how.

Endersby illustrates how the flood of plants entering Europe during the age of discovery (15th through 18th centuries) was in no small part the impetus for the Linnaean binomial system, and orchids naturally play a starring role as novel plants needing efficient classification.

But be assured, the book is no dry text on plant cataloging; at times it's pretty funny: the author relates that Francisco Hernandez, physician to the King of Spain, observed Montezuma drinking cacao with vanilla, noting among its many medicinal qualities "Vanilla also 'expels flatulence' and (rather fortunately, given the previous property) was highly aromatic."

The Europeans exposed to the New World wonder of tropical flora and fauna associated much of the tropics with lusty sensuality, inhibition and hedonism. It's no wonder, then, that orchids, so plentiful in the Neotropics compared to Europe, became linked to the fantasy of the jungle and its libertine "noble savage" free from prudish constraint.

The "orchidmania" of the late 18th and 19th centuries is also explored, as Endersby shows how it overtook the wealthy of Europe, particularly Britain, and was made possible by increased world trade, accumulation of wealth and cheaper, stronger glass and iron that could be used to build the large hothouses needed for tropical orchids. He also shows how those hothouses led ultimately, and ironically, to the democratization of orchids. Interestingly, Endersby notes that, most likely, the first tropical orchid to flower in Europe in 1731 was then called *Helleborine americana,* and today is *Bletia verecunda* or *Bletia purpurea*, the pine pink orchid—a Florida and Caribbean native!

The orchid became even more entwined into both learned and popular culture after Charles Darwin's work on how orchids lure insects for pollination and his famous prediction that a moth with an exceptionally long tongue must have evolved alongside the orchid *Angraecum sesquipedale* in order to reach the plant's pollen, which is secreted in an exceptionally long nectary. This saw the rise of orchid fiction and lurid accounts of explorer-botanists resorting to all sorts of unpleasantries—including death—to find the next new and valuable orchid.

There's also a brief but interesting overview of orchid mass production, made possible partly by the work of biologist Lewis Knudson's discovery in the 1920s that beneficial fungi don't themselves cause orchid seeds to germinate, but rather feed already-germinated seedlings. This allowed growers to help the process along with sugars and other fungi proxies. Whether you're an orchid fanatic or not, "Orchid: A Cultural History" combines the qualities of sound scholarship, enjoyable text and humor with fascinating bits of information connecting it all.