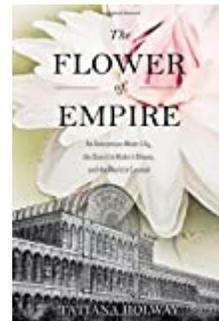




Tatiana Holway. *The Flower of Empire: An Amazonian Water Lily, the Quest to Make It Bloom, and the World It Created.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. xii + 306 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-537389-9.



Reviewed by Suzanne Moss (Royal Horticultural Society)

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Commissioned by Dolly Jørgensen (Umeå University)

Tatiana Holway has created an immensely readable and well-researched piece of horticultural literature. She charts the discovery and cultivation of the enormous tropical water lily, *Victoria regia*, from the chance happenings of plant hunting to its immense popularity in Victorian England.

The charting of the history of this amazing plant allows thorough scrutiny of the Victorian era and places the elusive worlds of plant hunting and collecting into their general societal context. The book is thoroughly researched and brings in tidbits of fascinating plant-related activity which are often overlooked in works on similar subjects. Holway allows us a view into the high-stakes world of plant hunting, the science of botanical gardens, royalty, the horticultural elite and its associated politics, the development of expensive growing technologies, and remarkable horticultural spectacle never seen before, and rarely since. In this period of history, plants were at the forefront of science, a captivating fascination and a ready tool for expressions of social status. Holway captures the scramble for new material by which to satisfy these endeavors and the extravagant investment of knowledge and capital required to bring them to fruition. We are taken through the rise and fall of Kew gardens, the unwavering dedication of Joseph Paxton, and the symbiotic

manner in which the giant water lily helped to shape the venue of its ultimate display—the Crystal Palace.

The study of garden history can be problematic, and at times it struggles to meet the academic integrity or popular interest of similar historical subjects. It is refreshing to find a text that triumphs on both accounts. Holway's book contains new research and is excellently referenced while also providing a fresh perspective on often-trodden ground. A study of the development of a field that depends considerably on the passion of its practitioners requires an understanding of people and personalities. An element often missed elsewhere, Holway's readable style permits a fleshing out of characters in the book, and allows the reader to understand their motives and influences. We are given glimpses into the personalities of the big players in the story of the plant through anecdotes and primary research. Through this, we are able to understand the nineteenth-century botanical world more thoroughly. The personal touch enhances our understanding of the subject and makes the book enjoyably readable. It is a book that would be just as comfortable under the Christmas tree as on the reading list of a thesis. Anyone who has attempted to achieve this marriage of scholarship and pleasure knows that it is an exceptionally difficult task, but one that feels effort-

less here. An epilogue provides a conclusion and factual wrap-up of the story and the personalities within in discreet chunks.

Victoria regia remains a crowd-pleaser to this day,

and this book lives up to its subject. To be enjoyed by pleasure readers and scholars alike, it is an excellent account of this remarkable plant. Holway has perhaps broken new ground in her style. We can only hope she will discover more remarkable plants this way.

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