

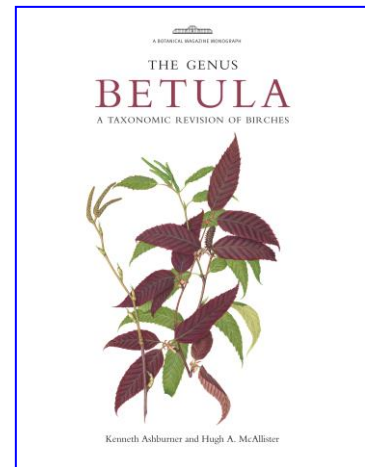


Book review

Published on line: 26 November 2013

The Genus *Betula*, A Taxonomic Revision of Birches by the late Kenneth Ashburner and Hugh A. McAllister. 448 pp. 2013, Kew Publishing, ISBN 9781842461419, RRP £68

The result of a collaborative effort, this book is a synthesis of the knowledge of *Betula* across geographic regions and scientific disciplines. With its glossary and name indexes, it reads partly like a monograph and partly like a textbook. The genus has been previously treated at the worldwide level, e.g. by A.K.Skvortsov (2002, published in Russian, English translation is available here:



<http://salicicola.com/translations/Skv2002Betula.html>). Other works have been mostly restricted geographically, while this book covers *Betula* around the world, including morphology, life cycles, phylogenetics, and more. Distribution maps for each of the forty-six species discussed in the monograph are largely based on maps published earlier elsewhere, though containing additions and expansions based on the revised taxonomy in the book. Scattered in the text are 18 plates of paintings by the artist Josephine Hague, detailed line drawings by other artists, images of important herbarium specimens, and photographs of trees and of *Betula* specialists *in situ*. The publication contains ten newly described taxa, including *B. skvortsovii* named after Alexei K. Skvortsov, as well as some new combinations. A section is devoted to the twelve species of *Betula* found on the *World List of Threatened Trees*.

Being wind pollinated, birches often hybridize. Their complex mating arrangements are covered in the chapter on breeding systems and hybridization. As one of the authors, Kenneth Ashburner, curated the U.K. national birch collection, there is no surprise that the section on cultivation is extensive and geared towards mating, propagating, and choosing the right birch for the right place. There are 19 pages containing cultivar names and descriptions.

The chapters are presented in a more conversational, less technical style, and the authors make the material engaging with their plain descriptions and plenty of visual aids. If you work on the Betulaceae family or are interested in birches, you will find plenty of useful information and enjoy the book. An added benefit is that it is not large, so that you can easily find space for it in your bookshelf, desk, or bag.

Heather L. Lindon, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Email: h.lindon@kew.org