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(Re)Discovering Floriculture History

The path of discovery can take many twists and turns, and the journey may take multiple years. New online resources help you search and discover historical information that was practically impossible to find before.

During recovery from COVID last fall, I started working on a capstone coleus project based on our joint project at NC State University and with W. Garrett Owen’s lab and have continued developing it over the past few months. As a result I have discovered some outstanding online resources available to anyone who wants to explore the history behind a particular plant, or any other subject. I am so excited about this informational discovery that I wanted to share details about the journey



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Journey Background. During my undergraduate years in the early 1980’s, I would often find myself camping out at a study desk in the Lilly Agricultural library at Purdue University. Stacks of reference books dominated the room and when a study break was needed, I would browse through the books on the shelves. A wealth of books on a wide assortment of specialty subjects lined row upon row of shelves. Each book was an entire encyclopedia of knowledge on specialty subjects such as rock gardening in England, hobbyist greenhouse culture of specialty plants, or ornamental grasses. Reading these books made me want to search for commercial greenhouse production and market gardening books from the 1800’s and early 1900’s. After graduation, my wife and I both

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enjoyed browsing used bookstores, so whenever the chance occurred, I would always search for commercial greenhouse production books. Only once did I find a market gardening book from 1913. Finding that treasured volume on a dusty shelf was like trying to find a needle in a haystack. At this time, bookstores faced a challenge of being a willing seller of a specialty book, but unable to find an interested, willing buyer.

Online Booksellers. Around December 2004, I discovered a new online book selling database called Abebooks. It created the opportunity for a bookseller to list specialty subject books and for buyers to find them. Over that Christmas break, I purchased over \$400 of old classics. I was able to obtain the 1949 floriculture classic *Florist Crop Production and Marketing*, by Dr. Kenneth Post. I was also able to discover an earlier 1937 classic *Fritz Bahr's Commercial Floriculture* by Fritz Bahr. All together, the books I found were a wealth of historical information about commercial floriculture production. I was also fortunate that I made my purchases early in the initial years of Abebooks launch. Soon thereafter, booksellers realized people like me were hungry for these types of specialty books and prices jumped 3X to 4X within a short amount of time.

Historical Documents. Coming back to the present has led to an even more exciting, recent discovery. In September while I was at Iowa State University for a greenhouse program that Dr. Chris Currey was hosting, I had an hour to fill and so I wandered into the campus library. I like wood carving, so I searched the computer database about carving book and then found them on the shelf. With more time to fill, I then got the idea of looking to see

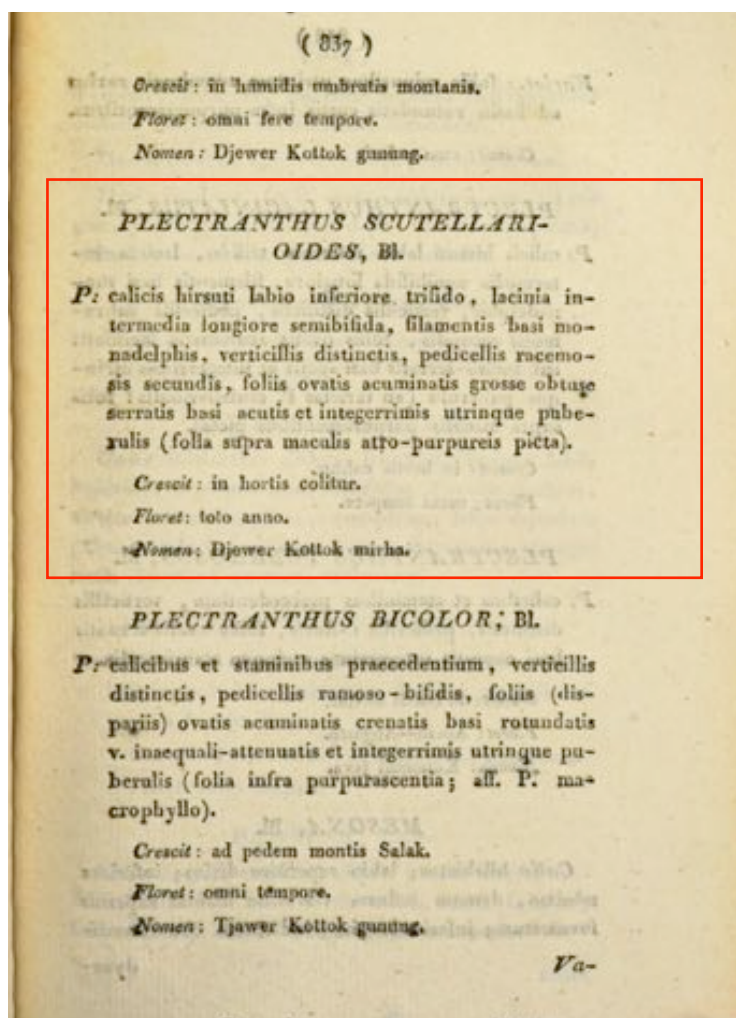


Figure 1. Highlights of the first scientific reference to coleus in the 1826 publication by Karl Ludwig Blume. (Source: Blume, C.L. 1826. *Plectranthus scutellarioides*, Bl. Bijdragen tot de Flora van Nederlandsch Indië, Batavia [Jakarta], Indonesia. p. 837.)

what coleus references were contained in the Iowa State University Library. The most interesting discovery was an online reference to a scanned PDF of a 1935 coleus availability list from E.F. Weaver Nurseries and Greenhouses of Wichita, Kansas. They were offering for sale 88 different coleus cultivars. This catalog was included in a digital library of historical documents on HathiTrust (<https://www.hathitrust.org/>).

Discovering the HathiTrust database opened up a wealth of historical documents that one would find difficult to

view due to the fact they were only at a distance library in Boston, New York City, or England for example. Now one can actually read these old texts. This greatly expands the resources available on any subject.

The other more empowering factor is that the PDF versions are totally searchable via key words. This is a VERY significant development. For example, on a trip to Europe over 20 years ago, a well respected 70 year old greenhouse industry person told me I should of visited a few places that I was not aware of. His comment was, “I had been given bad advises”. That comment was certainly true, and I replied, “I don’t know what I don’t know”. Experience and time helps one learn what they don’t know. Relating this back to the PDFs included in the database, the ability of searching for a key word such as coleus provided 45,347 listings. One can also filter them down by such criteria as location, language, or year. So now one can find 814 obscure coleus references from England between 1900 and 1910. This offers a whole new treasure of resources that contain hidden historical information about the subject you are interested in. In addition, once you select a reference to view, you can key word search again within the document and find exact pages that contain your desired subject. So it takes you to the exact location of the “X” on the historical treasure map! Now one can easily find scattered information on a subject instead of blindly paging through a document and hoping you spot something interesting.

Examples of searching for coleus information led me to an important text from 1915 by A.B. Stout, *The Establishment of Varieties of Coleus by the Selection of Somatic Variation*. That



Figure 2. The first color plate of the coleus published in Europe in 1852. (Source: Planchon, J.E. 1852. *Coleus blumei*. *Flore des serres et des jardins de l'Europe: annals générales d'horticulture*. Louis Van Houtte, Gand, Belgium. 8:141.)

scientific book contained an historical account of the discovery of coleus and a significant inclusion of a reference cited section. That made the ability to leap back further in time possible to find earlier significant citations. From Stout’s literature review and utilizing the HathiTrust database (it took 3 tries to finally get the key words correct to find it), I was able to view the 1826 publication by Karl Ludwig Blume that first describes coleus (Fig. 1). As an undergrad, I would never of dreamed of being able to find and view a reference from an obscure Indonesian-published

plant journal written in Dutch from 1826. Practically impossible has evolved into a possibility.

With a little investigation, I was also able to locate the first color plate of the coleus described by Blume when it was published in 1852 (Fig. 2). Another gold nugget of knowledge include finding out that in 1913 there was a specialty greenhouse in the U.S. that grew only coleus and sold over 2,000,000 cuttings a year. There was also a humorous note from W. Scott in 1892 about attempts to control mealybugs on coleus, “Of late years the coleus has been much troubled with mealy bug in our locality. A coal oil emulsion is death to the bugs, and perhaps to the coleus too.”

Another high quality database is the Biodiversity Heritage Library (<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/>) [it is cross referenced in the HathiTrust database too]. From that database one can view for example a collection of old seed catalogues scanned from the Henry G. Gilbert Nursery and Seed Trade Catalog Collection. For instance, if you want to see what cultivars of vegetables and flowers that were available in 1888, then one can find the Burpee Farm Annual from that year.

The development of online historical databases is at the magnitude of significance as the informational opportunities that Ancestry.com has created for people searching for genealogical information. One can discover obscure information that was practically impossible to find 20 years ago. So if you are interested in exploring plant history, considering doing a keyword search on these databases to make your own discoveries.



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