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Smithsonian Botanist Writes Book on Plants and People of Burma “The Weeping Goldsmith: Discoveries in the Secret Land of Myanmar”

Adventurous travel and discovery of rare, beautiful and scientifically unknown plants in the little-known country of Myanmar (also known as Burma) are the cornerstones of a new popular press book, “The Weeping Goldsmith: Discoveries in the Secret Land of Myanmar,” by W. John Kress, curator and research scientist in the Department of Botany at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History. The 288-page book, featuring more than 200 color photographs of exotic plants, landscapes and Buddhist temples taken by Kress, is published by Abbeville Press and due out in bookstores Sept. 29. The forward to the book is written by Wade Davis, noted ethnobotanist, and an Explorer-in-Residence at the National Geographic Society.

The book, written as a first-person narrative, follows Kress over the course of nine years as he surveys Myanmar’s teak forests, bamboo thickets, timber plantations, rivers and mangroves to document its incredible botanical biodiversity. Home to some of the world’s most striking landscapes, Myanmar is enchantingly remote, nourishing thousands of exotic plant and animal species and a range of unique indigenous cultures. Simultaneously, the country is often closed to—or avoided by—many scientists because of its impenetrable government bureaucracy.

Kress’ travels included study of several plant species not researched since their discovery more than a century ago. Among his many finds was “the weeping goldsmith,” a ginger flower and the namesake of his book. Legend has it that the local goldsmiths were brought to tears by the blossom because their creations paled in comparison to its beauty.

“The weeping goldsmith was one of the most beautiful flowers I found in Myanmar, yet it had never been scientifically described,” said Kress. “This country, which has been neglected by outsiders for so long, is a lovely land with a rich history and culture as well as a unique and vast biodiversity.”

The people and culture of Myanmar are highlighted in the book through Kress' understanding of their country's flora, natural habitats and human-dominated environments. The book includes excerpts from Kress' journals that serve as counterpoints to the accounts of earlier plant explorers. In addition to Kress' photographs, the book includes 30 archival images of Burma taken by these past explorers.

For more than 30 years, Kress has traveled to remote locations around the world to study members of the Zingiberales, an order of flowering plants, including gingers. His research has led him to explore the Amazon, the Andes, Madagascar, the South Pacific, tropical Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and Myanmar. Kress also is the author of "A Checklist of Trees, Shrubs, Herbs, and Climbers of Myanmar" and co-editor of "Plant Conservation – A Natural History Approach."

Kress also contributed to the newly published "Botanica Magnifica: Portraits of the World's Most Extraordinary Flowers and Plants," a landmark collaboration with Hasselblad Laureate Award photographer Jonathan Singer. "Botanica Magnifica" is an elegant art book with 250 stunning photographs of rare and exotic plants and flowers. The original edition of "Botanica Magnifica," consisting of five lavishly hand-bound volumes, was limited to 10 copies, the first of which was recently donated to the Smithsonian Institution. The smaller-sized edition, published by Abbeville Press, is now available at bookstores nationwide.

Kress and Singer will discuss "Botanica Magnifica" in a free public program at the U.S. Botanic Garden, Oct. 7, 1 – 3 p.m. Kress also will discuss "The Weeping Goldsmith" and his travels in Myanmar.

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