



BOOK REVIEW

ROOT GORELICK

Melocactus the genus in Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao

by George Thompson

Self-published; soft-cover; 8.5 x 5.5 inches; 71 pages.

This small volume is well described by its title. It is pleasant, with numerous photos, and can be read cover-to-cover in a half-hour. The first 40% of the book describes the ABC Islands (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao), their geography, geology, and biota. Only after that do we read about their melocacti.

Thomson recognizes the difficulty of classification due to recent rapid radiation in the genus *Melocactus*, rampant selfing, hybridization, and phenotypic plasticity. So he follows the “New Cactus Lexicon” (2006), except for the ABC Islands. The “New Cactus Lexicon” only accepts *M. macracanthus*, whereas Thomson accepts two

other species (*M. stramineus* and the very widespread mainland Central American species *M. curvispinus*) plus one natural hybrid (*M. ×bozsingianus*) in Aruba. I have not seen plants in habitat in Aruba, so will not gauge whether Thomson is correct, especially since whether to accept segregate taxa is ultimately a matter of opinion.

The front cover features a mature specimen of *Melocactus macracanthus* with an Aruba whiptail lizard (*Cnemidophorus arubensis*) on the cephalium. This seems like a missed opportunity to describe saurochory, i.e. seed dispersal by lizards, which is important in *Melocactus* (Figueiroa et al. 1994 *Biotropica* 26: 295-301), as might pollination by lizards (Gomes, Quirino & Machado 2014 *Plant Biology* 16: 315-322). Another missed opportunity is Thomson’s claim that *Melocactus curvispinus* cephalia possess annual rings. Given the lack of any outwardly obvious secondary thickening of cephalia, I find this claim remarkable, albeit maybe possible. A photo of annual rings in a cephalium would be very helpful and possibly even publishable as a small stand-alone paper.

As with most self-published books, this one could sometimes have used an editor. For instance, we read that *Melocactus andinus* may be native to elevations as high as 3,000 m (~10,000 ft) and could be considered alpine. However, on the very next page, we read the contradictory statement that no species of *Melocactus* can survive anything but the shortest exposure to ambient air temperatures below 15°C. This book also lacks a conclusion and, more disturbingly, lacks an index.

The sort of good news, though, is that most of this new book may have been edited, albeit several years ago. Several paragraphs of text and photos in Thomson 2013 book are copied verbatim from his 2008/2009 book “*Melocactus care and cultivation*” albeit without any attribution. While legally acceptable insofar as the author holds the copyright to both books, this seems ethically dubious. Plus, his earlier book had far better reproduction of photos than his 2013 book. Not that I am complaining about the content of copied text and photos, which are accurate and sometimes interesting. For example, Thomson asserts that *Melocactus* is probably not that closely related to *Discocactus* because only the latter genus continues growing new vegetative tissue once cephalia form, although I wish that he had cited some evidence for that claim (Gorelick 2014 *Madroño* 61: 194-200).

Despite these problems, this book is reasonably priced at £15 and of a sufficiently small format that I would definitely bring a copy with me when traveling to the ABC Islands, especially to Aruba.

