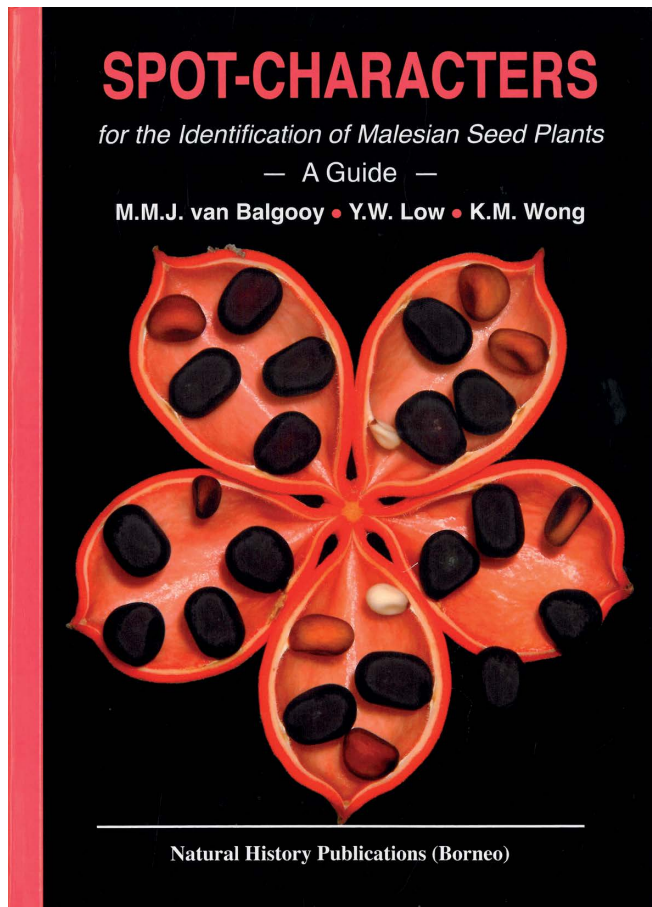


M.M.J. van Balgooy, Y.W. Low & K.M. Wong (2015)
Spot-characters for the Identification of Malesian Seed Plants: A Guide

x + 278 pp., richly illustrated
Kota Kinabalu, Natural History Publications (Borneo)
ISBN 978-983-812-159-0



This is an amazing book. In just 278 pages and hundreds of high quality photographs, an incredible amount of knowledge formerly hidden away in the grey brain cells of the three authors, is presented in a comprehensive way. Identifying plants, without having a sound prior knowledge of the plant diversity of a specific region, can be a frustrating activity, having to use identification keys that suppose your material has all necessary elements (flowers, fruits, stipules, etc.) nicely showing all necessary characters... And then for many of our tropical regions, such as the Malesian one (encompassing the countries Brunei, East Timor, Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines and Singapore) with an estimated number of 41,000 plant species, a comprehensive key to all families, let alone to all genera or species, is still lacking. (An interactive Key to all families of

Malesian seed plants has apparently been made, but unfortunately does not seem to work any longer at <http://www.kew.org/herbarium/keys/fm/key.html>; The Malesian Key Group 2004). The well-known *Flora Malesiana* series has been completed for only 20% and so often offers no help either. In conclusion, this publication allows using spot characters to identify your plants, which will be a great help. The book distinguishes 119 different spot characters, categorized into 17 groups, ranging from growth forms to seed characters. It is an update of the 1997 publication by the first author (*Malesian seed plants, volume 1 – Spot characters*), which had a lot less characters and only black/white line drawings as illustrations.

Scientists having an in-depth general knowledge on tropical plant forms with which they are able to identify plants are increasingly rare. That is why this achievement of undoubtedly the most knowledgeable botanist of the Malesian region, Max van Balgooy at Naturalis, Leiden, is not only extraordinary but also most welcomed. His knowledge has now been supplemented with the experience of Y.W. Low and K.M. Wong of Singapore Botanic Gardens. For those who regularly identify plants, it is often hard to tell how and why they recognize a certain plant as belonging to this family or genus. Often, it is a hunch they get from their brain which even they cannot explain. When one would ask such an expert “But, how do you see that this flowering twig is an Ebenaceae?”, one might get the answer “Well, if you look at the lower leaf surface, you will see small black dots”. However, the expert has not even looked at the lower leaf surface! I sometimes see a plant, and a name pops up in my brain. I cannot explain why, and sometimes the name does not even ring a bell. But, when I check that name, it often appear to be correct. To me, these are the wonders of our brain, and I am very pleased to see that this book has now captured most of this intuitive knowledge from the best.

It is too bad the book does not come with a brief explanation as to how to use it. To most it would seem obvious, but still it would help a less experienced but enthusiastic student to set his/her first steps into the amazing world of plant recognition. Finally, this work cries out to be transformed into an interactive multi-entry identification key which one can put on a cell phone and carry along in the field. It might be that it has in fact already been incorporated into the interactive Key mentioned above, but such is unclear at present. With this type of knowledge dwindling worldwide, often the result of many decades of experience, let's hope others will follow this fine example and try and capture that knowledge before it is lost.

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