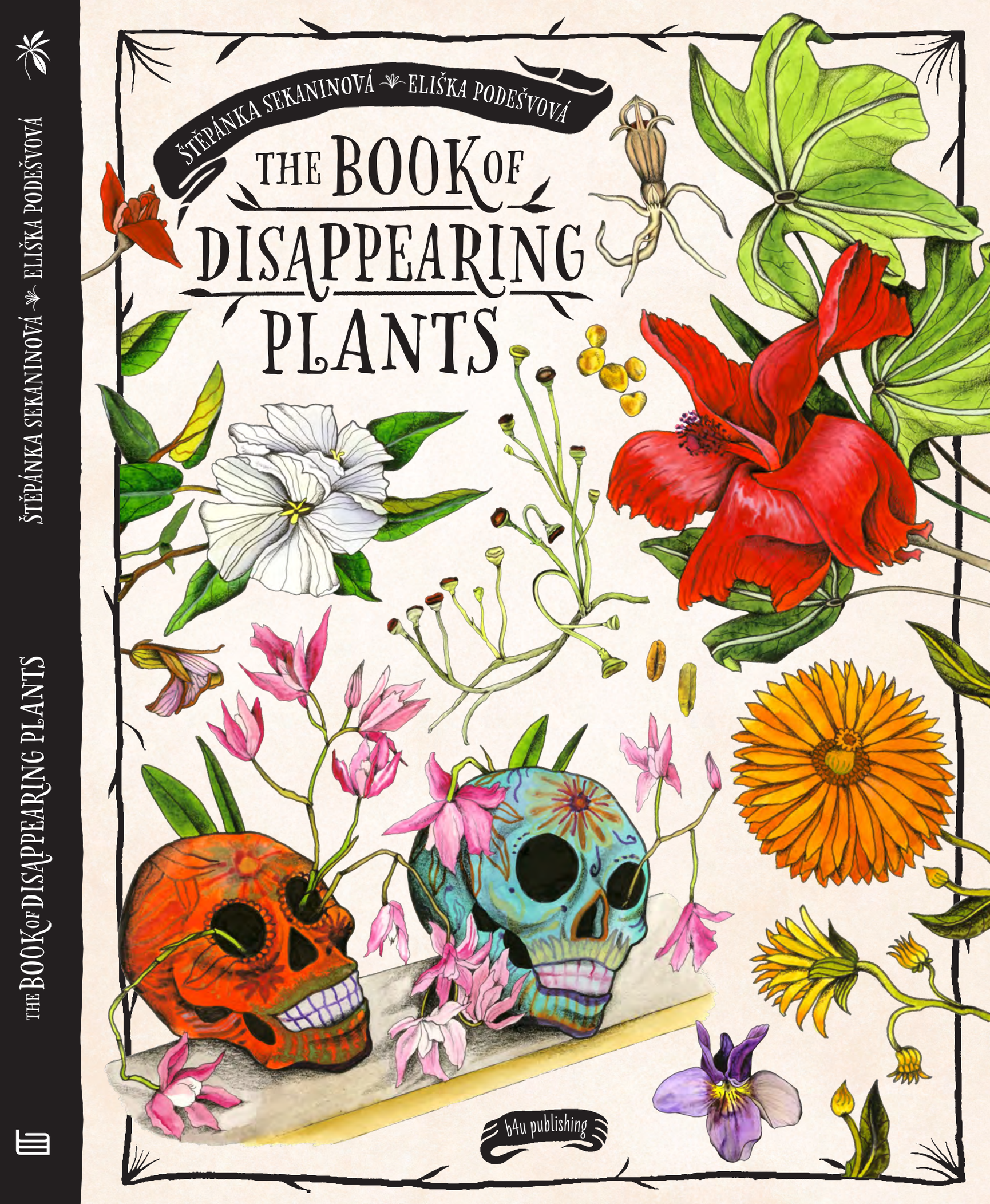


ŠTĚPÁNKA SEKANINOVÁ ELIŠKA PODEŠVOVÁ
THE BOOK OF DISAPPEARING PLANTS

MUSA FITZALLANII

WILD BANANA

Eugene Fitzherbert Albini Fitzalan was an ardent botanist and plant collector. The Irishman spent his whole life searching for rare plant species, often spending most of his time away from home, be it in England or the scorching heat of Mexico. Then he travelled to Australia in 1849 and became enchanted by the flora of the world's smallest continent. There, in north–eastern Queensland near the Daintree River, he discovered a species of wild banana that was later named after him, *Musa fitzalanii*. At that time, it was one of three Australian banana species.

However, while *Musa acuminata* and *Musa jackeyi* merrily continue producing delicious bananas, *Musa fitzalanii* has vanished from both Australia and the world's most prestigious botanical gardens – and from the face of the earth entirely. Only its name, which acknowledges its ardent discoverer, serves as a reminder that it once grew, bore fruit, and delighted the world with its presence.

The banana species of the *Musa* genus come from tropical regions of the 'Old World' (Europe, Africa, and Asia). The genus was first formally established in 1753 by Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus (1707–1753), the founder of botanical and zoological nomenclature. However, even before Linnaeus, the Musa genus had been initially described by Dutch botanist Georg Eberhard Rumpf (1627–1702). The term 'Musa' may derive from the Arabic word for bananas (*mauz*, *moz*, or *mouz*) or from the Greek botanist Antonius Musa (63–14 BC), who was physician to the first Roman Emperor, Octavian Augustus.

BANANA SPECIES
Musa Fitzallanii
is extinct

The delicious fruits of banana trees have always been prized

Daintree, Queensland, Australia

Probably became extinct in 19th century

THISMIA AMERICANA

BANDED TRINITY

Nature can work miracles. Once upon a time, in the period now known as antiquity, a strong wind blew and, together with rain, carried the seeds of a tiny plant from one continent to another. Or perhaps the seeds travelled on a powerful ocean current or with hungry animals crossing the ancient land bridge of Beringia, which once connected North America to Southeast Asia. Whatever the case, it must have happened somehow.

Many years went by until the year 1912, which was when a young American botanist, Norma Etta Pfeiffer, then still a student, discovered a peculiar little white flower with delicate blue–green stripes while researching the wetlands near Chicago's Lake Calumet. The little flower was unlike any other plant in the wider surrounding area and Norma immediately devoted her time to studying it, naming the plant *Thismia americana*, which is also called banded Trinity. She soon found that the flower spent most of its life underground. Lacking chlorophyll, the green pigment, it had no other option but to draw energy from parasitic fungi. It discreetly flowered in July to reproduce and continued to bloom until mid–September, after which it retreated shyly underground and remained there for the rest of the year.

Probably WON'T BE REVIVED

↑ Detail of the root and the white flowering head

Lake Calumet, Chicago, USA, North America

1917 – disappeared from the earth

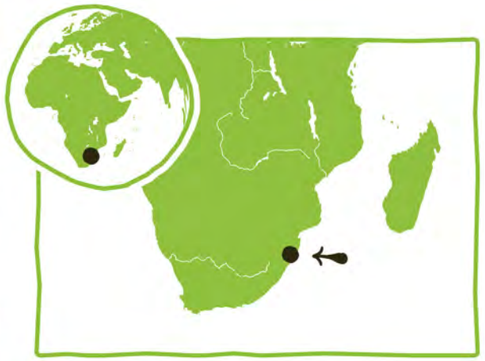
After 1916, the mysterious flower vanished without a trace and has been never been found since. This may have been due to the industrial exploitation of the land around Lake Calumet. Its cause was also hindered by the fact that no one managed to grow it from the collected seeds.

Scientists haven't given up and continue their search for the elusive plant, whose only relatives grow in tropical regions. However, amateur botanist George Johnson assessed their chances of finding it thus: 'I'm more likely to see the sun set in the east...'

In July, a little white head sprouts from the root →

ENCEPHALARTOS WOODII

WOOD'S CYCAD



Ngoya Forest, South Africa

1916 – vanished from the wild

Merchant sailor, accomplished athlete, farmer, and enthusiastic botanist John Medley Wood (1827 – 1915) was overjoyed when he discovered a cluster of four specimens of the beautiful African cycad *Encephalartos woodii* on the edge of the Ngoya Forest in South Africa in 1895. Later, as curator of the botanical garden in Durban, he sent his representative James Wylie back to the site to collect cuttings in 1903 and 1907, which he did, returning with five scions. It was worth it, as this stunning cycad tree that can grow up to 6 meters tall.

Beneath its dark green canopy of leaves drooping downwards like a large umbrella a whole family, along with distant relatives, could find shelter. This rests on a long and unusually smooth trunk that gradually widens towards the bottom. The majesty of the cycad is crowned with large yellow-orange cones. Named after its discoverer, its days were already numbered back then. On account of its natural healing properties, local people used to peel off the tree's silky bark in large quantities, causing it significant harm. Damaged in this way, the trees lost their vitality and perished in large numbers, until they completely disappeared from their homeland.

NOT FOUND
in the wild since
1916

Yellow-orange cones of Wood's cycad

This majestic tree deserves to be an object of admiration in botanical gardens, and thankfully it is so. Fortunately, it grows well in such places and its beauty can still be admired today. Even though the tree has been extinct in the wild and no specimen has been found since 1916, botanists continue to search for it. They would like to find its female variety, which no one has ever seen.

Wood's cycad grew on the edge of the Ngoya Forest reserve

VIOLA CRYANA

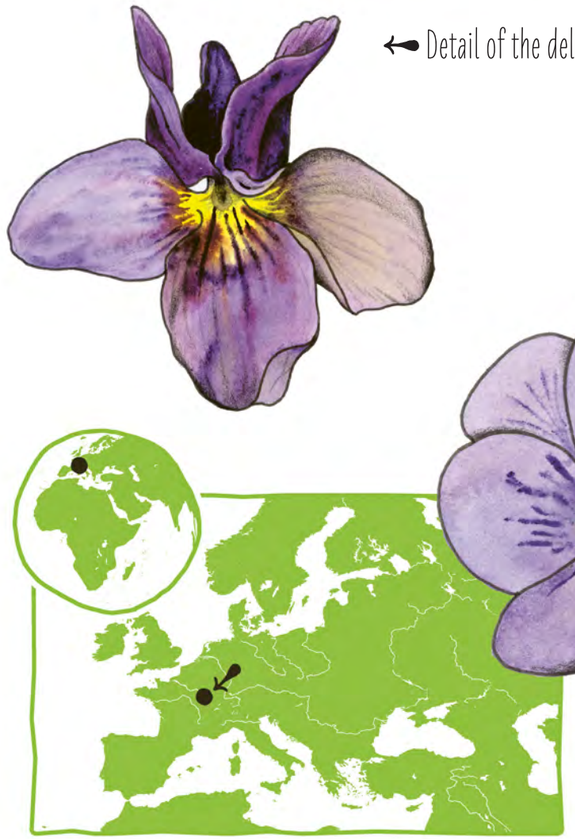
CRY VIOLET, CRY PANSY

This small, delicate flower, barely 12 cm tall, needed the nourishment of minerals in limestone, and therefore it wasn't by chance that it grew in the French region of Cry, which was known for its limestone–rich soil. Scientists first noted its existence in the 1860s, which led to a flurry of interest. Eighteen years later, in 1878, it was formally described. At that time it could not have been foreseen that just a few decades later, this delicate flower would vanish from the face of the earth. This occurred between 1930 and 1950, and was primarily due to the growing demand for limestone. As is often the case when humans need something from nature, they take it without a second thought. During that period, limestone mining in the Cry area increased significantly, but no one stopped to think that this activity was depriving a beautiful unassuming plant of the environment it needed to survive. Science also sometimes takes its toll. The gentle beauty of the Cry violet induced botanists to acquire specimens for their herbaria. And so they plucked, collected, observed, measured, studied, and plucked some more — until they had picked the delicate plant to extinction.

VANISHED
in the first half of the 20th century

The tiny plant aroused the keen interest of scientists →

← Detail of the delicate flower



Cry, Yvonne, France, Western Europe

1930–1950 – became extinct

Viola cryana has survived only in herbariums →

↑Viola cryana was around 12 cm tall

LAELIA GOULDIANA

FLOWER OF THE DEAD

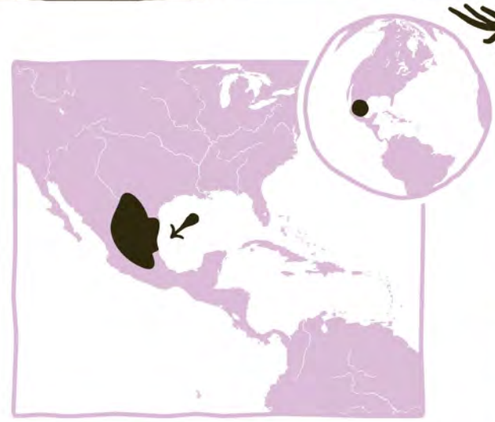
← *Laelia gouldiana* adorned the Day of the Dead celebrations

Many people yearn to be beautiful. But they may not be aware that there are two sides to beauty: one is alluring, while the other is quite frightening. The exquisite Mexican orchid Laelia gouldiana, known locally as the 'flower of the dead', is an illustrative example. It was so desirable that everyone wanted to possess it, to delight in the beauty of its perfectly symmetrical violet flowers. And therefore people picked and gathered it in huge amounts. They picked it and laid it on church altars. They decorated graves and tombs with it on the Day of the Dead celebrations. Its flowers made these places less frightening and brought them to life. It was also gathered and sold to plant collectors and lovers of its delicate blooms. But while its beauty was appreciated by all, no one noticed that *Laelia gouldiana* was disappearing from the wild.

When it still grew wild, it inhabited the mountainous areas of the Mexican state of Hidalgo. It thrived at high altitudes, in cool and dry conditions. It also needed other plants to grow on, as their bodies formed the substrate in which it grew. But the flower of the dead was no parasite. It was rather an epiphyte – a kind of plant that does not root in soil.

Those who yearn to be beautiful should take note. This species, with its delicate blossoms, paid the price of its beauty. It was also affected by climate change, which certainly didn't help this flower of the dead.

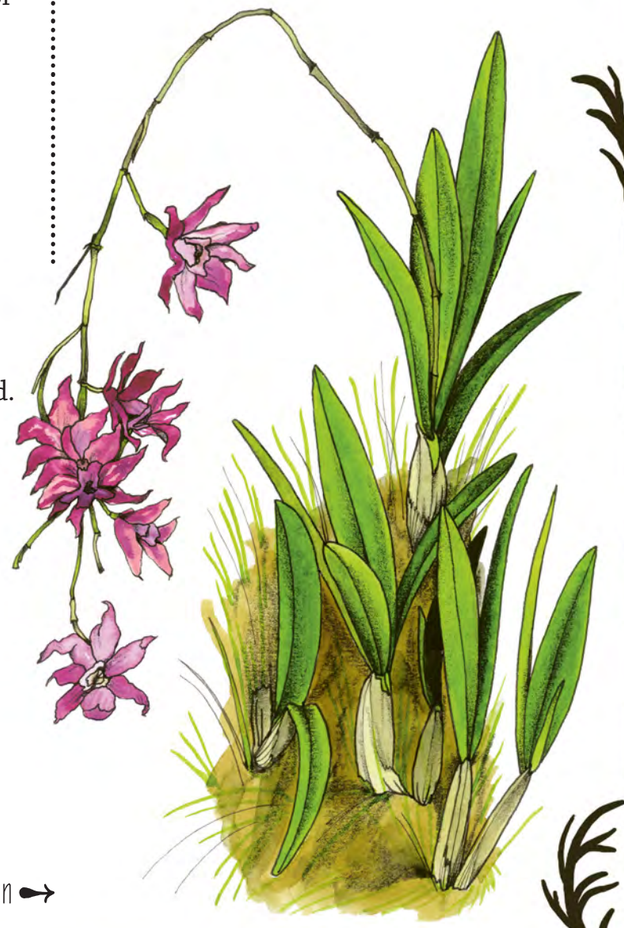
↑ The orchid bloomed in autumn and winter



Mountain regions of Hidalgo state, Mexico

End of 20th century – disappeared from the wild

CLIMATE CHANGE & HUMAN ACTIVITY led to its disappearance



It needed other plants to grow on →

INDEX

At first glance plants might be dismissed as insignificant, serving only for decoration. Yet, a closer examination would reveal their fundamental importance to life on our planet. Not only do plants produce oxygen, they help the land retain water, they improve the soil, and they are an important source of food. On top of that, they also make us feel good. Although plants and trees are everywhere, they are extraordinary. Even so, we walk by them as if they were nothing. We tear them up, trample them and cut them down… and they just grow back. But what happens if they don't? What happens if one day they begin to disappear, just like the unfortunate species in these pages, and continue disappearing? The urgent message of this book is: Let's protect our precious plant world while there's still time.

30 PLANTS
from around
the world

b4u publishing
www.albatrosmedia.eu