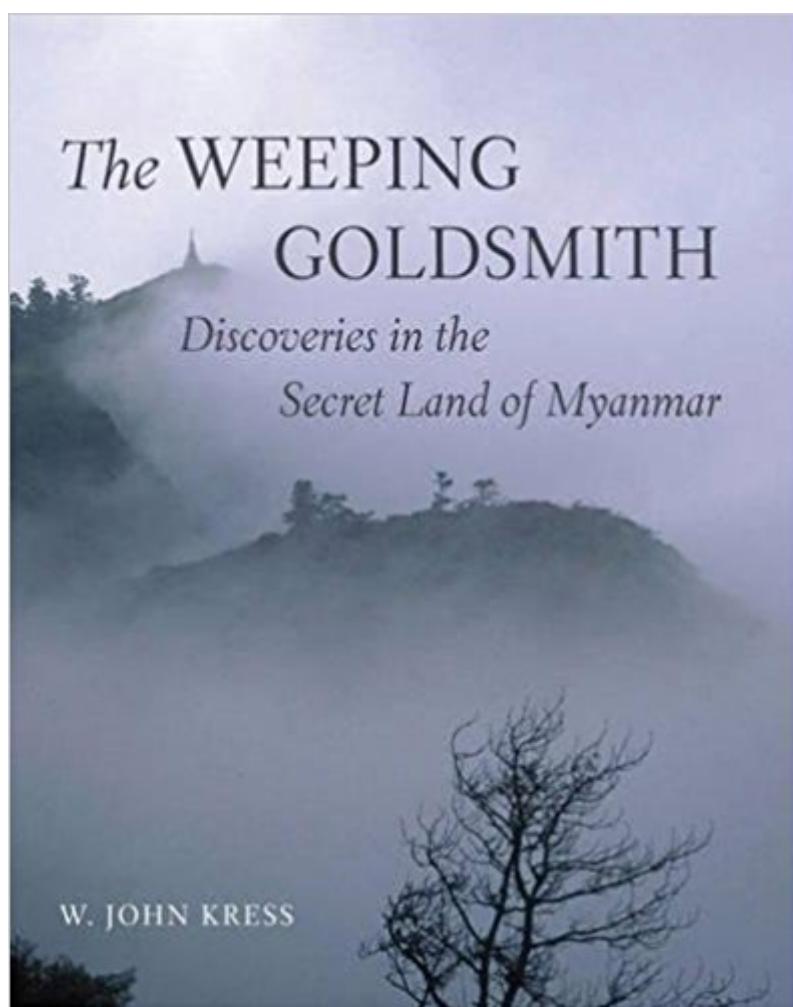


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# The Weeping Goldsmith: Discoveries In The Secret Land Of Myanmar



## Synopsis

A distinguished Curator and Research Scientist at the Smithsonian Institution, W. John Kress, recounts his natural history exploration over the course of nine years in the wild lands of Myanmar in search of rare, beautiful, and scientifically unknown plants. In the great tradition of Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*, this book is a first-person narrative of daunting travel and scientific discovery in the little-known country of Myanmar. Dr. Kress explored many areas in this enigmatic country, surveying its teak forests, bamboo thickets, timber plantations, rivers, and mangroves to document its incredible botanical diversity. Myanmar is one of the great biodiversity hot spots in Asia, but because of its social isolation and reputation for political repression it has been closed to or avoided by many scientists. Nevertheless, Dr. Kress was determined to search for and record plants that had not been studied since they were first discovered by Western botanists over a century ago. Among the rarities he came upon was a new species of plant called "the weeping goldsmith," a ginger flower whose Burmese name was derived from the legend that the local goldsmiths were reduced to tears because none of their own creations could rival its exquisiteness. Dr. Kress also relates how he came to appreciate the people and culture of Myanmar through an understanding of their flora, natural habitats, and human-dominated environments. Included are fascinating excerpts from his field journals that serve as counterpoints to the accounts of earlier plant explorers. Illustrating the text are some 200 of Dr. Kress's own color photographs of the incredible plants, people, landscapes, and temples he witnessed in his travels as well as 30 archival images of Burma taken by past explorers. The back matter features an illustrated portfolio of representative native plants. This lively armchair exploration should appeal to a general readership as well as to botanists, conservationists, and environmentalists.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Praise for *The Weeping Goldsmith*: • A Booklist Top 10 Science & Technology Book of 2009 "A fascinating memoir• Engagingly written and beautifully illustrated. Highly Recommended" • Choice

In the great tradition of Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*, this book is a first-person narrative of daunting travel and scientific discovery in the little-known country of Myanmar. Dr. Kress explored many areas in this enigmatic country, surveying its teak forests, bamboo thickets, timber plantations, rivers, and mangroves to document its incredible botanical diversity. Myanmar is one of the great biodiversity "hot spots" in Asia, but because of its social isolation and reputation for political repression it has been closed to--or avoided by--many scientists. Nevertheless, Dr. Kress was determined to search for and record plants that had not been studied since they were first discovered by Western botanists over a century ago. Among the rarities he came upon was a new species of plant called "the weeping goldsmith," a ginger flower whose Burmese name was derived from the legend that the local goldsmiths were reduced to tears because none of their own creations could rival its exquisiteness. Dr. Kress also relates how he came to appreciate the people and culture of Myanmar through an understanding of their flora, natural habitats, and human-dominated environments. Included are fascinating excerpts from his field journals that serve as counterpoints to the accounts of earlier plant explorers. Illustrating the text are some 200 of Dr. Kress's own color photographs of the incredible plants, people, landscapes, and temples he witnessed in his travels as well as 30 archival images of Burma taken by past explorers. The back matter features an illustrated portfolio of representative native plants. This lively armchair exploration should appeal to a general readership as well as to botanists, conservationists, and environmentalists.

This is not a book to pack in your bag to take on a trip to Myanmar. It's a terrific reference written by someone who loves discovery and is willing to endure hardships to make those discoveries. I dipped into the section on hard-to-reach Chin State after having gone there a month ago. I'm embarrassed to say that I did not appreciate it as much as I should have now that I've read that portion of the book. This book is a work of determination and love. I shall study up before my next

adventure to that wonderful emerging country. Excellent book!

You don't have to know a plant from a Plantagenet to fully enjoy this incisive volume by Dr. Kress. The photos (botanical and geographic and cultural) are first class--both current and historic. His text is both journalistic and personal and comfortable. The book is a scholastic achievement and reflects far more research than that required by his botanical presentation. Run, do not walk, to buy this volume. Never mind the price.

Wonderful photos of unique plants with stories of the adventures that led to their scientific documentation. I saw beautiful flowers in Myanmar that were of unknown names and unremarkable to the Burmese guides. On the back cover of this book is a photo that matches one I took in a marketplace. They are called 'The Weeping Goldsmith.'

Great

Beautifully written. An adventure with a purpose. An introduction to the people and natural landscape, accessible to every reader. Photos are wonderful. Kress writes like a poet.

Have you ever wanted to travel to Myanmar and see its ancient pagodas and forests? Dr. John Kress' *The Weeping Goldsmith: Discoveries in the Secret Land of Myanmar* is a great book for those who have always wanted to visit the Golden Land, as well as those of us who simply can't get enough of Myanmar. Dr. Kress, a curator at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, spent around a decade traveling to the country updating a checklist of Myanmar's plant species (see *A CHECKLIST OF THE TREES, SHRUBS, HERBS, AND CLIMBERS OF MYANMAR (CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE UNITED STATES NATIONAL HERBARIUM, VOLUME 45: 1-590)*). *The Weeping Goldsmith* contains his reflections on his time in Myanmar, as well as his thoughts on Burmese culture more generally. One question worth addressing immediately is why this book is so expensive. Well, *The Weeping Goldsmith* is more a mix between a photo book and a regular memoir. The book has over 200 of Dr. Kress' photos depicting various indigenous plants and Buddhist temples. The book is visually appealing enough to flip through as you might with a professional photographer's coffee-table book (Dr. Kress photos are beautiful - I originally thought they were taken by a professional photographer). These photos also make the book more enjoyable to read, as you can see a photo of the plant or location described immediately

in front of you. In a sense, it provides the reader a much stronger sense of visiting and seeing Myanmar than a regular memoir with fewer pictures might. My wife (originally from Myanmar) became nostalgic for her home after flipping through. Of course, the text itself is the star of the book, and here *The Weeping Goldsmith* also brings Myanmar to life for the reader. Much of the book is about Dr. Kress' adventures in Myanmar (not unlike Dr. Alan Rabinowitz' *Life in the Valley of Death: The Fight to Save Tigers in a Land of Guns, Gold, and Greed*), although *The Weeping Goldsmith* also spends a significant amount of time discussing Myanmar itself. In addition to a brief description of Myanmar history, Dr. Kress also has a chapter that discusses the potential role that Buddhism has played in protecting Myanmar's biodiversity (disclosure: Dr. Kress has cited a paper I wrote on this subject). He also interweaves the history of other botanical explorers, most notably Francis Kingdon-Ward, into his own tale. Some of the anecdotes in the book were quite amusing. Dr. Kress' team found many interesting species of flower in Buddhist shrines, including the Weeping Goldsmith ginger which is common in temples but was previously unknown to Western science. At another point, after spending days looking for a particular hemiorchis, Dr. Kress had to shove his colleague to prevent him from accidentally sitting on the first specimen they had found. Dr. Kress encountered other difficulties in the forests of Myanmar, from bloodsucking leeches to urinating cicadas. However, the saddest and most frustrating problem for his research was the political chicanery of Myanmar's junta, which often denied his team permits to travel to important locales and made his fieldwork generally more complicated. Having been to several of the locations described in *The Weeping Goldsmith*, I smiled as I recalled how the book really does describe what travel in Myanmar is like. I took the same long ride by elephant to Alaungdaw Kathapa National Park, and my tractor also broke down en route. Dr. Kress perfectly captures the Myanmar that I know and love, making me confident that *The Weeping Goldsmith* would serve as a great introduction for those readers who have always wanted to visit the Golden Land.

I was attracted to this book by the intriguing title, the beautiful flower photos, and because I'm always interested in accounts of scientific fieldwork -- I'm a field geologist. I was also interested in learning how the author could conduct an ambitious program of botanical research in Myanmar, one of the world's most closed and autocratic countries. Dr. Kress tried his best to steer clear of politics, but local politics wouldn't stay away from him. Nevertheless, he, his Smithsonian colleagues, and many Burmese botanists and foresters were able to research and publish an almost 600-page checklist of the flora of Burma, the first significant new account in 25 years. His research program extended from 1996 to 2003, when it largely ended due to political turmoil there. Dr. Kress is a good

writer and a good photographer. This would be essential reading for professional (and aspiring) botanists, and I think many readers interested in botany, flowers and/or Burma would find it a good read. Check it out. Happy reading--Peter D. Tillman

Botanist and ginger expert W. John Kress has created quite a treat with "The Weeping Goldsmith: Discoveries in the Secret Land of Myanmar." The book is like a National Geographic article writ large about a stunningly beautiful country with a sad history. Pros:- The photos are fantastic and the flowers - with intriguing names like Weeping Goldsmith, Forest Flame, Swallow-Wort and Cat's Tongue - are exquisite.- Great shots of Buddhist temples and stupas- Kress's enthusiasm for his work is palpable Pro or Con (depending on point of view)- The book sticks to flowers and does not touch on politics

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