

Obituary



Prof. Walter H. Lewis
(1930 – 2020)

Dr. W.H. Lewis, a world renowned botanist, passed away at his home in St. Louis, Missouri, on 17 Nov., 2020 at the age of 90 years. He was born on 26 June, 1930, in Ottawa, Ontario (Canada). Dr Lewis became interested in plants during his childhood. For his 12th birthday, he asked for and was gifted a greenhouse. He learned to grow roses from his uncle, and started selling them locally as a small business. After completing under-graduation in biology from University of British Columbia, he did doctoral work in plant biology at University of Virginia under the DuPont fellowship. Dr. Lewis revised the genus *Rosa* under the guidance of Walter Flory, and his thesis was recognized as one of the best work for J. Shelton Horsley Research Award from Virginia Academy of Sciences in 1957.

Prof. Lewis had been well known for his 1977 monumental book *Medical Botany: Plants Affecting Man's Health* (Wiley), co-authored with his wife Dr Memory Elvin-Lewis. This valuable publication coincided with growing consumer interest in herbal medicine as well as the herbal supplement industry in USA. It quickly became a referral publication on medicinal plants. First edition sold more than 20,000 copies and in 2003, it was extensively revised and reprinted under the title: *Medical Botany: Plants Affecting Human Health*.

Lewis' field work in botany and ethnobotany lead him to North and South America, and Asia. In his role as the Director, Herbarium at Missouri Botanical Garden, he was the editor of the *Flora of Panama* (1965-1970). His work on

American Ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*, Araliaceae) conservation led him to be among the first American scientists to travel to China during 1970.

He was a professor of biology at Washington University, St. Louis (1964-2000). He taught a popular undergraduate course based on his book and not only instilled knowledge about useful medicinal plants in students, but also engrossed them with tales of adventures collecting medicinal/ethnic plant species from world over. His last medical botany class at Washington University vividly remembered by some students who witnessed him arrive dramatically dressed in 'Jivaroan' tribals style from Amazon forests. Lewis' work with his wife in West Africa during mid-1970s laid the groundwork for their long-standing collaboration in ethnobotany. As ethnobotanist, Lewis was well-known for his work among the native people of Peru. For more than 20 years, he and Elvin worked in a team conducting research on plants used by Achnual tribes and other natives of that region. He was awarded a significant grant from the International Cooperative Biodiversity Groups Programme of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to study ethnobotany in Andean tropical rainforests of Peru. Dr. Lewis was life member of SEB as well as the recipient of E.K. Janaki Ammal Medal in 2003 for his significant contributions in ethnobotany.

Dr. Lewis published more than 300 research papers/books, ranging from classical taxonomy, Ethnobotany, phyto-



chemistry, pharmacognosy and ecology. In the later part of his career, he returned to his original interest on genus *Rosa*. He revised section *Rosa* for the ***Flora of North America***, and the 9th volume of this flora has been dedicated to him. He was named Rosarian of the Year in 2013 by American Rose Society. During 2016, he described a new species, *Rosa memoryae*, which is native to Texas and named in honour of his wife Dr Memory Elvin-Lewis.

During last days, his mind was obviously impacted by Alzheimer's disease, but he enjoyed talking with people and was always polite and kind. Death of Dr Lewis has been a huge loss to botany, medicine and academic fraternity worldwide. Walter Lewis is survived by his wife, his two children, and three grandchildren.

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