

# OBITUARY: KAI LARSEN (1921–2012)

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Kai Larsen was born on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1926 in Hillerød, a small town north of Copenhagen with some 30,000 inhabitants and mostly known for being the home of many Danish kings who inhabited the Frederiksborg Castle. His father, Axel Georg Larsen, owned a book-binding business and Kai Larsen was brought up in the proud tradition of Danish craftsmanship in which high quality and perfection are key-words. He graduated from Frederiksborg Gymnasium (Highschool) in 1946 and initiated an academic career with studies at the University of Copenhagen from which he graduated as *Candidatus magisterii* six years later with a major in botany (1952). Following his graduation he continued pursuing his academic career as a research assistant and teacher at the University of Copenhagen, until he became associate professor at the Pharmaceutical University in Copenhagen in 1962. One year later, in 1963, he became the first professor of botany at Aarhus University and he was charged with building up a Botanical Institute at the university. Until then the only 30 years old university had not trained biologists, so it was Kai Larsen's duty to build up research and teaching in botany to underpin the biology study. The city of Aarhus supported the young university in many ways and in general the economic climate was favorable during the high times of the 1960s. In a few years Kai Larsen was able to build up an institute

that encompassed 2000 m<sup>2</sup> of very beautiful greenhouses in the municipal botanical garden, a new herbarium, and many laboratories for a wide range of botanical studies including limnology, cytology, anatomy etc. Since then these various sections of the institute have grown and become important internationally, nationally and locally. The herbarium of Aarhus University is now widely known internationally, not least for its collections of tropical plants including very important collections from Thailand. The green houses are a major attraction for the public and exhibits 8000 plants from all over the World, and next year a new tropical palm house will be inaugurated.

Kai Larsen was a prolific teacher. During his many travels he lectured about his research all over the World. In SE Asia he tutored many young botanists, especially from Thailand. Many of them spent prolonged visits and some of them took their degrees at Aarhus University. For his Danish students he will mostly be remembered for his taxonomy classes which were always meticulously prepared and elegantly delivered. For lack of a good text Kai Larsen wrote a Danish language book (*Kormfyernes Taxonomi*, 1974) which precisely summarized the most recent classification of vascular and especially flowering plants at the time based on the systems of Takhtajan and Cronquist.

Kai Larsen was much respected for his contribution to tropical botany and taxonomy. He was elected member of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters (1979) and The Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters.

Kai Larsen's scientific career was as a plant taxonomist. His first expedition was to Greenland when he was still a student, and his earliest publications are about Greenland's flora. During his early years at the University of Copenhagen he was asked to administrate and lead the First Thai-Danish Expedition which was held during the years 1958-59. This expedition was the initiative of the then Danish Ambassador to Thailand, Gunnar Seidenfaden, who was a keen botanist in his spare time with an immense knowledge of the more than one thousand species of Thai Orchids. The expedition explored the Malay Peninsula, eastern Thailand, and the mountains in the north. During the expeditions Kai Larsen and the other Danish members of the expedition established close working relationships with the Thai botanists, not least the then director of the Forest Herbarium in Bangkok, Tem Smitinand. Two shorter expeditions (1961-62; 1963) followed and contributed to further tighten the bonds between Thai and Danish botanists. In 1965 Kai Larsen invited a group of leading European and Thai botanist to a meeting at Kew where it was decided to initiate the *Flora of Thailand* project. This was to become Kai Larsen's largest scientific undertaking. Since its initiation Kai Larsen has contributed treatments of 44 families to the flora and has participated in all biennial *Flora of Thailand* meetings, except the last one which was held in Chiang Mai in November of 2011. Kai Larsen was editor of the *Flora of Thailand* together with Tem Smitinand from 1970 when the first volume appeared until 2009 when part 29 had been published. Since then Kai Larsen has been editor together with Thawatchai Santisuk. This Thai-Danish undertaking with collaboration from many international specialists, is now very firmly established and the termination of the project is within reach in the coming years. As mentioned, Kai Larsen published taxonomic accounts of a great number of plant families, but his favorite families were the legumes and the gingers. In these families he has contributed a vast number of publications, not only about their Thai species, but treating species from all over South East Asia. For instance, he has published many shorter journal papers about new gingers and also collective books

on Malay gingers (1999) and a treatment of the Chinese gingers in *Flora of China* together with Wu (2000). For the legumes he wrote the Caesalpinoid genera for *Flora of Thailand* and also for *Flora Malesiana* (with Ding Hou 1996), and he co-authored the entire volume on legumes for the *Flora of China* (with Wu, Raven and Hong, 2010). Kai Larsen was honoured by his colleagues who named many plant genera after him. *Kailarsenia* and *Larsenaikia* are two genera in the Rubiaceae; *Kaisupeea* – a gesneriad – honours both Kai Larsen and his wife Supee S. Larsen; *Larsenianthus* is a genus in the ginger family that he loved so much. Many species were also named for him: *Bauhinia larsenii* is a fossil legume from China; *Impatiens larsenii* is in the Balsaminaceae; *Cassytha larsenii* in Lauraceae; *Crotalaria larsenii* is a legume; *Primula larsenii* in the Primulaceae; *Lasianthus larsenii* and *Mouretia larsenii* both in the Rubiaceae; and finally *Caulokaempferia larsenii*, *Cornukaempferia larsenii*, *Curcuma larsenii*, *Hedychium larsenii*, *Kaempferia larsenii* and *Zingiber larsenii* all honours his great contribution to the taxonomy of Zingiberaceae.

Kai Larsen was the grand old man in tropical botany. His contributions were many and encompassed institution building, teaching, research, tutoring young botanists, and he also participated in the work of international organisations such as International Association of Botanical Gardens. He was a true leader and highly respected, not least in Thailand where he was always treated with great admiration. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1996 Kai Larsen retired from his professorship at Aarhus University. But he continued his work as professor emeritus and came in to work several days a week. He was involved in many activities, both his own research and also representing Aarhus University in various international projects such as *Flora Nordica* and *Flora of China*. And he remained close to his love for the *Flora of Thailand* and made many journeys and participated in many meetings. He organized the 14<sup>th</sup> *Flora of Thailand* meeting in Copenhagen in August of 2008. After that his health prevented him from travelling more to Thailand but his interest was just as vivid as it had always been. He delivered his talk to the 15<sup>th</sup> *Flora of Thailand* meeting in Chiang Mai as a videotaped presentation, which was his last public engagement with the project. On 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 2012 he passed away surrounded by his wife and colleagues.