G. LEDYARD STEBBINS

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IF I HAD TO SINGLE OUT Stebbins's outstanding characteristic, I would select his unquenchable enthusiasm. Whether it was directed to the discovery of a rare plant or to defending a controversial viewpoint in an argument with a colleague, it always took complete possession of him. G.[eorge] Ledyard Stebbins was born 6 January 1906 in Lawrence, New York, a scion of a wealthy New York family, keen on natural history. Even though Stebbins was an avid young naturalist, he chose to prepare for a law career when entering Harvard in 1924. But under the influence of the charismatic botanist M. L. Fernald, he soon switched to botany and became an enthusiastic field botanist. In the course of his studies, however, Stebbins became dissatisfied with Fernald's classical methods and shifted his allegiance to the plant cytologist E. C. Jeffrey and the plant geneticist Karl Sax. Since the leading Harvard botanists were all feuding with each other, Stebbins had considerable trouble having his thesis accepted, but finally received his Ph.D. in 1931. It was at this period that Harvard president Lowell was rumored to have said, "What is it about pretty little flowers that makes the botanists hate each other so?" Fortunately, Stebbins ignored these feuds and learned what he could from all of them and also from the geneticists E. M. East and W. Ernest Castle of the Bussey Institution. Although he remained an enthusiastic field botanist all of his life, his research from now on was mostly directed to genetics and cytology.

After a short stay at Colgate University, Stebbins moved in 1935 to the University of California, Berkeley, as research assistant to Professor E. B. Babcock. The first product was a highly original analysis of a polyploid agamic complex in the genus *Crepis*. As a result of his achievements, Stebbins was soon appointed assistant professor of genetics, and remained in California for the rest of his life. In the meantime, Stebbins's interest had largely shifted to plant evolution, a development favored by his contact with a research group at the Carnegie Institution at Stanford University. It was also stimulated by several of his friends, the botanist Edgar Anderson and the Russian-American naturalist-geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky. Stebbins completed in 1947 most of his researches on the polyploid complexes. In 1945 Stebbins was invited by Columbia University to give a set of the famous Jesup Lectures. When the volume of the expanded lectures appeared in 1950 under the title *Variation and Evolution in Plants*, it was 643 pages long and included 1,250 citations. It was arguably the most important volume on plant evolution ever to be published, written by an author who was a superb field naturalist, thoroughly acquainted with the evolutionary literature on plants, particularly their systematics (at the species level), genetics, and cytology, and who was familiar with the zoological

literature. It was a beautiful synthesis of the evolutionary plant sciences and is rightly considered one of the cornerstones of the so-called *Evolutionary Synthesis*.

Stebbins's scientific activity continued undiminished after 1950. In that year he moved to the Davis campus of the University of California, where he organized a flourishing department of genetics. In the ensuing years, he published, in addition to 280 scientific papers, six more books, several dealing with general subjects in biology. In due time he was considered America's outstanding botanist, deservedly so because he excelled in the breadth of his interests, the soundness of his judgment, and the overall volume of his work. He had a great influence as a teacher. Many students received the Ph.D. under his guidance. His outstanding contributions to science were duly recognized by numerous honors, including the National Medal of Science. Even though he officially retired in 1973, he continued doing fieldwork, reading the current literature, lecturing, and publishing until his eighties. He died on 19 January 2000, a few days after his ninety-fourth birthday. (A detailed analysis of his scientific contributions was published in 1997 in the *Amer. J. Botany* 84:1625–37. A full-length biography by V. B. Smocovitis is in preparation.)

Elected 1961

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