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Tracking down the scents of the natural world



Roman Kaiser was born in Kirchberg SG in 1945. He studied chemistry at Winterthur Technical College and in 1968 joined the Givaudan research centre as a fragrance and flavour chemist. Since 1975 he has worked mainly on the investigation and reconstitution of all types of natural scents.

Until the middle of the 19th century, natural extracts of scented flowers or other plant parts, together with some animal secretions, were the only raw materials used in the creation of fragrances.



Chemists working in the fragrance industry have been investigating natural products extensively since the dawn of modern organic chemistry. As a result of this continuing research work, perfumers now have at their disposal about 500 regularly used natural products for the preparation of their creations, but at least double this number of synthetic fragrance compounds that have originated from natural products.

Roman Kaiser has over the past three decades travelled around the globe chasing new scents – a quest that has taken him to such exotic places as Lower Amazonia, Papua New Guinea, India and many rain-forest biotopes.

He says that the sense of smell gives us a sense of other living beings, of our own species, of animals and plants, and plays an important role in the forces ruling the living world. Scents open an additional dimension in our life. They tell us so much and together with visual perception they generate quite of-

ten aesthetic effects so that something we see becomes even more beautiful because it has an attractive scent.

Scents are also vital for the reproduction of plants. The only reason for a flowering plant to produce a scent is to attract a responding animal pollinator to ensure the preservation of the species.

The rainforests are by far the most life-intensive biotopes on earth and since natural scents are always ultimately connected to living beings, the chances are corre-



spondingly high to be successful on such quests for new scent molecules and new scent concepts. The technique used involves taking samples by non-destructive methods only. This usually includes enclosing the flower in a glass vessel for up to two hours and capturing the natural scent in an absorption trap. This is later analysed in the laboratory using mainly gas chromatography and mass spectrometry, and the results can allow chemists to reconstitute natural scents. Such methods have over the past 25 years allowed Kaiser and his colleagues to investigate more than 1'900 flower, plant, wood and herb scents out of a selection of about 9'000 species of plants evaluated during this time.

Roman Kaiser has published two books so far. "The Scent of Orchids" summarises the olfactory and chemical investigations of over 160 species. "Meaningful Scents around the World" offers an insight into a hidden world.

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