February’s program was both interesting and entertaining as presented by our guest speaker Jeff Chemnick, owner and operator of Aloes-in-Wonderland, a specialty nursery and garden in Santa Barbara. He is also the founder and operator of Mexico Nature Tours, specializing in botanical (and ornithological) ecotours throughout Mexico and a respected authority on Mexican cycads who has published numerous articles and described several species new to science. The topic for the evening’s slide show was “Treasures of the Sierra Madres: Botanizing in Mexico,” and we were taken on a lively, colorful and informative tour focusing primarily on the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas.

Chemnick explained that the eastern and western Sierra Madre mountain ranges converge in the Mexican state of Chiapas, in a region known as the Transvolcanic Belt. The area is characterized by snow-capped mountains which drive the botanic speciation but is also home to cloud forests and deserts, with the whole range available for exploration in the Tehuacan Cuicatlan Biosphere Reserve in Oaxaca. There is also an abundance of limestone outcroppings and cliffs throughout southern Mexico, and Chemnick shared photos of some of the varied, but inaccessible, plant life that could be seen growing on these rock walls. It is his contention that this region is home to the best plants because of its unique climate and terrain.

Chemnick’s first trips were cycad tours to Chiapas, and he remarked that in addition to the cycads, he found that the agaves and echeverias were among the plants given the best reviews from his tour participants. His slide show supported his assertions about the diversity and popularity of the plant life, as the audience reacted positively to the many species depicted, including an enormous Beaucarnia gracilis and a Yucca lacandonica. Other unusual specimens he showed were the red Hechtias, the white-flowered Plumeria rubra, the very tall Dasyliirion longissimum, as well as Agave montana, Pachycereus weberi, Platanus mexicana, and many, many mammillarias, echeverias and tillandsias. His pictures gave viewers a great sense of the size and longevity some of these plants can attain when growing undisturbed in their natural habitat. He also included pictures of large dahlias growing wild among the cactus to further illustrate diversity. While many of these specimens cannot be grown locally, over the years Chemnick has collected and successfully bred others, including echeverias, agaves and aloes. Of course, most of the plants seen on his tours are only collected as photographs, as many are threatened, like the local Golden Barrel Cactus which was nearly wiped out when a regional dam was built.

After his presentation Chemnick responded to audience questions and noted that many of this tours can be tailored to a group’s preferences, as the areas he travels to offer such a variety of choices for exploration. For more information on his tours, you can visit: www.mexiconaturetours.com; or you can check out his local plant selections from his nursery at www.aloesinwonderland.com.

Sabine Steinmetz