



# Verne Grant

1917–2007

BIOGRAPHICAL

# *Memoirs*

*A Biographical Memoir by  
Douglas E. Soltis*

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NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

# VERNE GRANT

October 17, 1917–May 29, 2007

Elected to the NAS, 1968

Verne Grant was born on October 17, 1917, in San Francisco and grew up in the Oakland area when it still had an Old West feel and was considered isolated from the East Coast. He had an early interest in natural history and science, and he loved the outdoors and hiking. Those interests would ultimately provide the framework for his becoming one of the leading figures in plant evolution in the later 1900s and early part of this century. Some of his books and articles from the 1960s and '70s remain influential today.

Verne's interest in natural history ultimately took him to the University of California, Berkeley, where he majored in botany. He had to work his way through college during those years of the Great Depression and recounts those years as "hard ones" but he graduated in 1940 with honors. After completing his degree, Verne wanted to take a break from his studies and see tropical rainforests, so he traveled for two years in Central and South America. During this period he also performed war service in Panama, where he served as a translator for the U.S. War Department in what was then the Panama Canal Zone.



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By Douglas E. Soltis

After World War II Verne returned home to California and went back to UC-Berkeley to pursue a Ph.D. and continue his studies in plant biology and genetics. He received his doctorate in botany and genetics in 1949. His first paper was also published in 1949: Pollination systems as isolating mechanisms in angiosperms (*Evolution* 3:82-97). This publication represented a pioneering study, in that it provided some of the first evidence for sympatric speciation—evolution of new species alongside their surviving ancestors in the same region—based on his observations of pollinators and their consistent behavior for individual species.

After completing his Ph.D., Verne spent a year as a visiting investigator at the Carnegie Institution of Washington at Stanford University. From 1950 to 1967 he worked at the Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Garden as a geneticist/experimental taxonomist. During

that time, he was affiliated with the Claremont Graduate School, first as an assistant and then associate professor. From 1967 to 1968 Verne was a professor at Texas A & M University; from 1968 to 1970 he served as Director of the Boyce Thompson Southwestern Arboretum and professor of Biological Sciences at the University of Arizona. He then settled in for a long stay at the University of Texas, where he was professor of botany until 1987 and professor emeritus until his death on May 29, 2007. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1968.

Verne's most influential publication was *Plant Speciation* (first published in 1971; second edition in 1981), which has been a long-time standard read by several generations of students in plant systematics and evolution. *Plant Speciation* remains an authoritative work to this day, offering a good review of the classic literature and loaded with plant examples of interest to students and researchers. Also of broad interest was his earlier book, *The Origin of Adaptations* (1963). Verne was an expert on the Phlox family (Polemoniaceae), which was the focus of much of his work on pollination and taxonomy.

*Flower Pollination in the Phlox Family* is another classic (coauthored with Karen Grant) that has been read for decades by students interested in pollination. Another personal favorite of mine was his book, *Genetics of Flowering Plants* (1975). The impact of this book has often been overlooked, certainly overshadowed by *Plant Speciation*. This book was an excellent summary of what was known at that time about plant genetics. Today it is still considered a useful synthesis of the evolutionary genetics of flowering plants.

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