



Wild Heathers of Britain and Ireland:

An Illustrated Taxonomic Key & Field Reference Guide

Calluna (Heather), *Daboecia* (St. Dabeoc's Heath), *Erica* (Heaths)
and *Phyllodoce* (Blue Heath)



Taxonomic Key

a. Leaf Arrangement	
(i) Leaves arranged oppositely	<i>Calluna vulgaris</i> (1)
(ii) Leaves arranged alternately	b.
(iii) Leaves arranged in whorls of 3-4 (Up to 5)	c.
b. Corolla Structure	
(i) Tubular corolla with four fused petals	<i>Daboecia cantabrica</i> (2)
(ii) Tubular corolla with five fused petals	<i>Phyllodoce caerulea</i> (3)
c. Anthers	
(i) Anthers positioned protruding from corolla	d.
(ii) Anthers positioned within corolla	g.
d. Calyx & Leaf Hair	
(i) Calyx shorter than pedicels; corolla-lobes divergent distally; summer-flowering; glabrous leaves	<i>Erica vagans</i> (9)
(ii) Calyx shorter than pedicels; corolla-lobes divergent distally; summer-flowering; hairy young leaves	<i>Erica x williamsii</i> (17)
(iii) Calyx longer than pedicels; corolla-lobes parallel distally; winter to spring flowering	e.
e. Tissue Flanges	
(i) Tissue flanges between leaf bases maintain width throughout their length	<i>Erica carnea</i> (11)
(ii) Tissue flanges between leaf bases narrow towards the downwards base	f.
f. Flowering Period & Stems	
(i) Flowers Mar-Jun; corolla length 4-5mm; stems up to 1.2m; well-developed stems present; hairy young twigs (microscope)	<i>Erica erigena</i> (5)
(ii) Flowers Nov-Jun; corolla length 5-7mm; stems up to 60cm; well-developed stems absent; subglabrous young twigs	<i>Erica x darleyensis</i> (14)
g. Leaf-Margins	
(i) Leaf-margins are revolute and meet under leaf obscuring lowerside; Flowers in panicles	h.
(ii) Leaf-margins are revolute and do not meet under leaf (or only distally) which reveals at least proximal part of lowerside; Flowers in racemes (or apparent umbels)	j.

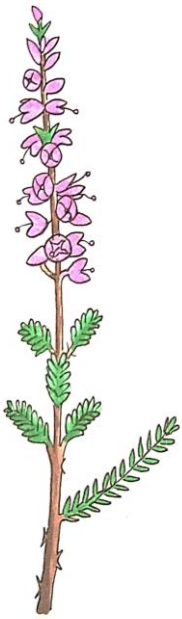
h. Height & Bracteoles	
(i) Shrub height up to 80cm; some bracteoles borne close to pedicel apex, overlapping calyx; flowers in summer (ii) Shrub height often >80cm; bracteoles borne on proximal part of pedicel only, not overlapping calyx; flowers in spring	<i>Erica cinerea</i> (7) i.
i. Stigma & Corolla	
(i) Stigma red; corolla 4-5mm; all hairs smooth (microscope) (ii) Stigma white; corolla 2.5-4mm; some hairs on young twigs with rough surface (microscope)	<i>Erica lusitanica</i> (13) <i>Erica arborea</i> (10)
j. Flowers & Basal Appendages	
(i) Flowers in terminal elongated racemes; anthers with absent basal appendages (ii) Flowers in terminal elongated racemes; anthers with short basal appendages (less than half the length of the anther) (iii) Flowers in terminal umbel-like clusters; anthers with basal appendages	<i>Erica ciliaris</i> (6) <i>Erica x watsonii</i> (16) k.
k. Leaf Colour & Sepals	
(i) Lower side of leaves green; sepals glabrous or with only short hairs; anthers with triangular appendages (ii) Lower side of leaves whitish; sepals with long hairs; anthers with linear appendages	<i>Erica terminalis</i> (12) l.
l. Hairs	
(i) Sepals and upper sides of leaves usually glabrous except for long hairs; most of leaf lower side exposed; ovary and fruit glabrous (ii) Sepals and upper sides of leaves usually with dense short hairs as well as long hairs; most of leaf lower side obscured; ovary and fruit hairy (iii) A few hairs present on the upper part of the ovary	<i>Erica mackayana</i> (4) <i>Erica tetralix</i> (8) <i>Erica x stuartii</i> (15)

- References:** Rose, F. (2006) *The Wild Flower Key*, Penguin, London
 Stace, C. A. (2019) *New Flora of the British Isles*, C&M Floristics, Suffolk
 Stace, C. A., Preston, C. D. and Pearman, D. A (2015) *Hybrid Flora of the British Isles*, Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland, Bristol
 Turpin, P. G. (1990) *The Wild Heathers of the British Isles*, In: *A Guide to some difficult plants*, pp. 109-119, Wild Flower Society, London

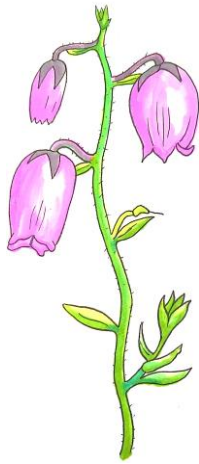
Notes: This research was supported by the BSBI Post-graduate Plant Study Grant.
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 Mark C. Rodgers (2022)



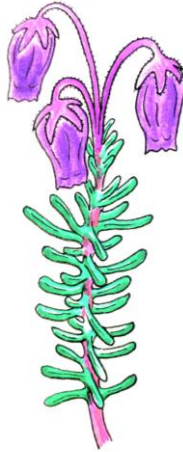
Natives ~ Illustrations



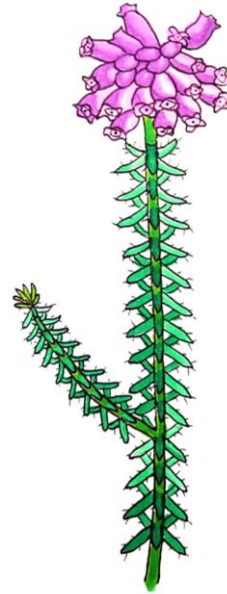
(1) *Calluna vulgaris*
Heather (Ling)



(2) *Daboecia cantabrica*
St. Dabeoc's Heath



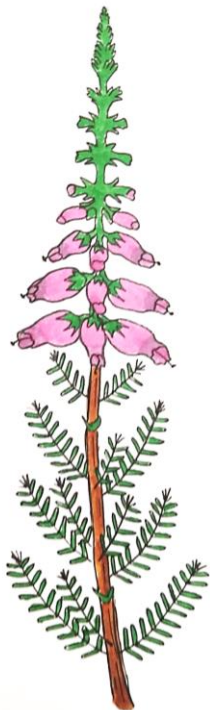
(3) *Phyllodoce caerulea*
Blue Heath



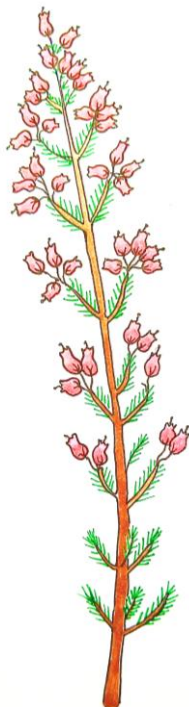
(4) *Erica mackayana*
Mackay's Heath



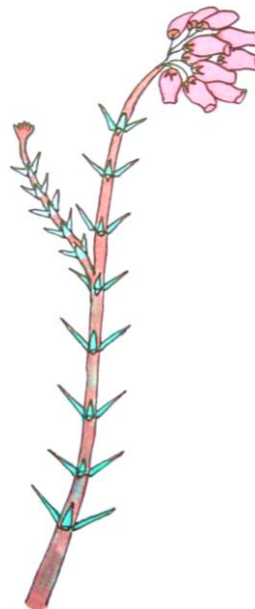
(5) *Erica erigena*
Irish Heath



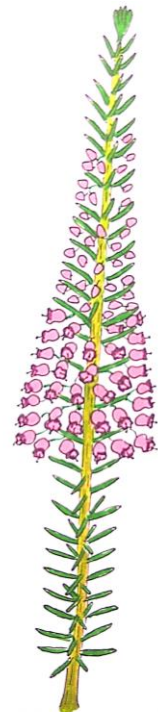
(6) *Erica ciliaris*
Dorset Heath



(7) *Erica cinerea*
**Bell Heather
(Fine-Leaved Heath)**



(8) *Erica tetralix*
Cross-Leaved Heath



(9) *Erica vagans*
Cornish Heath

20mm

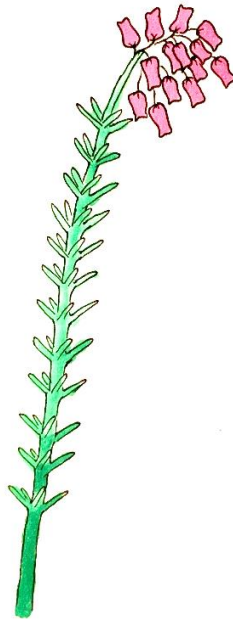
Neophytes and Hybrids ~ Illustrations



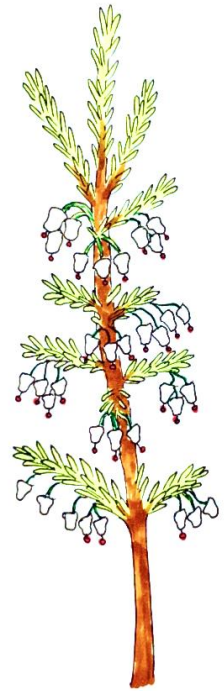
(10) *Erica arborea*
Tree Heath



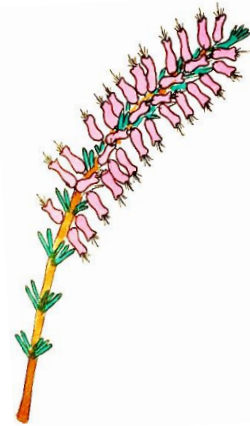
(11) *Erica carnea*
Winter Heath



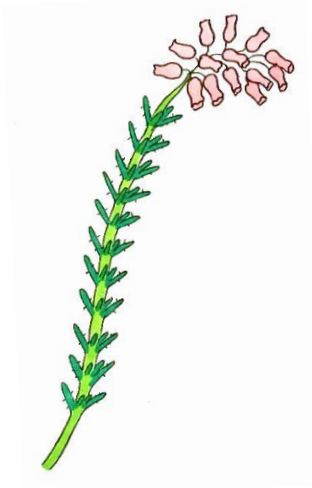
(12) *Erica terminalis*
Corsican Heath



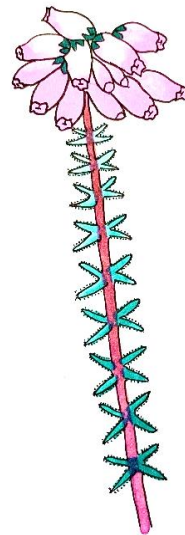
(13) *Erica lusitanica*
Portuguese Heath



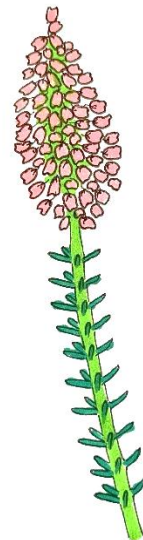
(14) *Erica x darleyensis*
(*E. Erigena x E. carnea*)
Darley Dale Heath



(15) *Erica x stuartii*
(*E. mackayana x E. tetralix*)
Stuart's Heath



(16) *Erica x watsonii*
(*E. ciliaris x E. tetralix*)
Watson's Heath



(17) *Erica x williamsii*
(*E. tetralix x E. vagans*)
Williams' Heath

20mm

Descriptions ~ Reference Guide

Species	Status	Leaf Length	Corolla Length	Height (Up to)	Flowering Period	Distribution	Habitat
(1) <i>Calluna vulgaris</i> Heather (Ling)	Native	1 – 3.5mm	3 – 4.5mm	60cm	July to October	Abundant in suitable conditions across the British Isles	Heaths, moors, bogs and open acidic woodlands
(2) <i>Daboecia cantabrica</i> St. Dabeoc's Heath	Native	≤ 14mm	8 – 14mm	50cm	July to October	Locally common in Western Ireland (Mayo and Galway)	Peaty and rocky moors
(3) <i>Phyllodoce caerulea</i> Blue Heath (Purple Mountain Heather)	Native	≤ 15mm	7 – 12mm	20cm	July to October	Very local in Scotland (Highland & Perth)	Rocky moors at 680 – 840m; High snowfall areas
(4) <i>Erica mackayana</i> Mackay's Heath	Native	2 – 4.5mm	5 – 7mm	60cm	August to September	Very local in Western Ireland (Donegal, Mayo, Galway & Kerry)	Peaty bogs
(5) <i>Erica erigena</i> Irish Heath	Native	5 – 8mm	4 – 5mm	120cm	March to June	Locally common in Western Ireland (Mayo and Galway)	Peaty and rocky moors
(6) <i>Erica ciliaris</i> Dorset Heath	Native	2 – 4mm	8 – 12mm	60cm	June to September	Very local in Southern England (Dorset, Devon & Cornwall)	Wet heaths
(7) <i>Erica cinerea</i> Bell Heather (Fine-Leaved Heath)	Native	4 – 7mm	4 – 6mm	60cm	June to September	Locally common in suitable conditions; Absent from much of Central England	Dry heaths & moors
(8) <i>Erica tetralix</i> Cross-Leaved Heath	Native	2 – 5mm	5 – 9mm	70cm	June to September	Locally common in suitable conditions; Absent from much of Central England	Wet heaths, moors and bogs
(9) <i>Erica vagans</i> Cornish Heath	Native	5 – 10mm	2.5 – 3.5mm	80cm	July to August	Very local in Southern England (Cornwall)	Dry heaths
(10) <i>Erica arborea</i> Tree Heath	Neophyte Survivor	2 – 6.5mm	1.5 – 4mm	250cm	January to April	Very local and scattered across British Isles	Hedgerows and open woodland (Garden escape)
(11) <i>Erica carnea</i> Winter Heath	Neophyte Survivor	5 – 8mm	4 – 5mm	50cm	December to April	Very local and scattered across British Isles	Hedgerows and open woodland (Garden escape)
(12) <i>Erica terminalis</i> Corsican Heath	Neophyte Naturalised	3 – 6mm	5 – 7mm	100cm	June to September	Very local and scattered across British Isles; Local in Northern Ireland (Londonderry)	Sand dunes (Garden escape)
(13) <i>Erica lusitanica</i> Portuguese Heath	Neophyte Naturalised	5 – 7mm	4 – 5mm	250cm	January to April	Very local in England (Cornwall) and Ireland (Cork)	Heaths and railway banks (Garden escape)
(14) <i>Erica x darleyensis</i> (<i>E. erigena x E. carnea</i>) Darley Dale Heath	Neophyte Survivor Hybrid*	5 – 8mm	4 – 5.5mm	60cm	November to June	Local and scattered through Southern England, Lancashire and Jersey	Hedgerows and banks (Garden escape)
(15) <i>Erica x stuartii</i> (<i>E. mackayana x E. tetralix</i>) Stuart's Heath	Natural Hybrid*	2 – 5mm	5 – 8mm	60cm	June to September	Very local in Western Ireland near parent <i>E. mackayana</i>	Peaty bogs
(16) <i>Erica x watsonii</i> (<i>E. ciliaris x E. tetralix</i>) Watson's Heath	Natural Hybrid*	2 – 5mm	8 – 12mm	45cm	June to September	Very local in Cornwall, South Devon and Dorset near parent <i>E. ciliaris</i>	Wet heaths
(17) <i>Erica x williamsii</i> (<i>E. tetralix x E. vagans</i>) Williams' Heath	Natural Hybrid*	5 – 10mm	2.5 – 3.5mm	45cm	July to August	Very local in Southern England near parent <i>E. vagans</i>	Dry heaths

* **Note:** Characteristics of hybrids are often intermediate to parents but can be highly variable.