

## BEGINNER'S CORNER

### What field guide should I buy?

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I was rummaging through some boxes of books at an auction house recently and came upon a hoard of botanical books, some leatherbound, others, as they say, in their original dust wrappers. There were 'guides' dating back to the 18th century, illustrated with wonderful engravings, nestled in amongst modern floras and field guides. Why would anyone want so many books? Yes, they were wonderful to look at and hold but the truth is that most people who enjoy plants in the wild refer to a limited hierarchy of works, both to confirm their identifications and also to learn more about the context of their discoveries. Today's budding field botanist has an apparently bewildering array of guides and floras to choose from. There are, however, a core of books which most people use. Several of these have been around for some time. However, it is worth buying the latest editions as these will include recent changes in taxonomy, new species and distributions. But note that none of the current editions of the popular field guides include the latest scientific name changes from the fourth edition of Stace's *New Flora of the British Isles*, published in 2019 (see below).

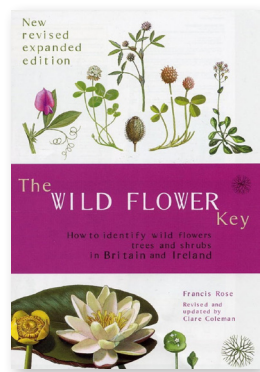
The way our field guides look is essentially a result of the phenomenal success of the bird guides of the 20th century, with their winning formula of artwork plates on one side of the spread and descriptions, with maps, on the other. The problem is that there are many more plants than birds. For example, a bird guide covering the British Isles may include around 500 species, but Collins *Wild Flower Guide* has 1,900 species and Stace's *New Flora* includes about 5,000 taxa. Trying to accommodate this dilemma has resulted in a number of different approaches from publishers. An obvious solution is to either include only common species or to exclude less colourful plants, such as grasses, sedges and ferns. However, it is important to bear in mind that the way we use

field guides is to compare and contrast the plant in front of us with the text, illustrations and keys in a guide. If the range of species covered is limited, often because of lack of space, then there is the danger of trying to 'fit' the plant to the available information and coming up with the wrong identification. This can be a real problem for those who run recording schemes. But, if the book is more comprehensive, the guide can become too heavy to carry, thus defeating its prime purpose of taking the book to the plant (*Collins Wild Flower Guide* is about 1.2kg!). These 'bricks' can be heavy to carry around in the field – expect a generation of botanists with back problems!

#### Field guides to consider

Bearing in mind the above, five currently available guides are worth considering. Three are illustrated with artworks and two with photographs. Here is a quick look at these.

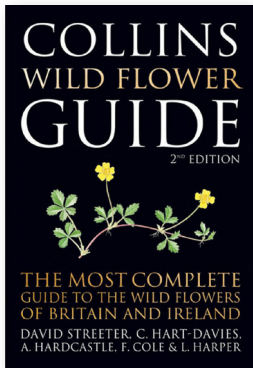
#### Artwork field guides



*The Wild Flower Key* by Francis Rose, updated and revised by Clare O'Reilly in 2006, combines a clever use of keys and descriptions, with important features highlighted, and has a useful key to plants not in flower. This is a guide that has been used by many

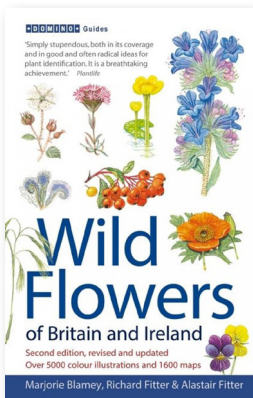
over the decades (the 1st edition was in 1981) and is still widely recommended. Its drawbacks are that its artwork is uneven (the 2006 edition, however, includes some excellent line drawings of finer details) and that it doesn't cover grasses, sedges and ferns.

*Collins Wild Flower Guide* (2nd edition, 2016) by David Streeter is far more comprehensive, giving



equal weight to all the groups, but comes in at 704 pages. It also has an effective mix of keys and descriptions. However, the artwork is again uneven, although unlike *The Wild Flower Key*, most species are illustrated in full.

*Wild Flowers of Britain and Ireland* (2nd edition, 2013) by Marjorie Blamey, Richard Fitter and



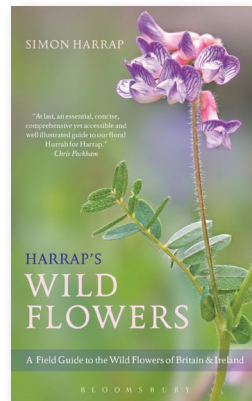
Alistair Fitter, like the Collins guide, covers all the groups, and even has thumbnail-sized distribution maps. The descriptions are rather brief and the use of keys is not as good as in the previous two books. Blamey's artwork can be a little too colourful, but

the range of features illustrated is good. It manages to pack a lot of information into its 492 pages.

### Photographic field guides

There are only two guides which use photographs that have a reasonably comprehensive approach.

*Harrap's Wild Flowers* by Simon Harrap, first published in 2013, has a clear layout and includes a map (based on the BSBI database), short description and photographs of each of the 930 or so species it includes. The presentation means that despite its 417 pages it does not cover the grasses, sedges and ferns. The 2,000 photos have been carefully selected and complement other guides. There are no keys.



*Collins Complete Guide to British Wild Flowers* by Paul Sterry (2006), from his Collins series, manages to

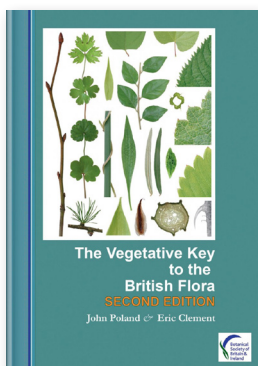


include a lot in its 304 pages, describing and illustrating more than 1,000 species, including a good range of grasses, sedges and rushes. In addition,

100 rarer species from various 'botanical hotspots' are described and illustrated. The layout follows the 'text with facing plates' formula, but details such as fruits and leaves of some species are included on the text page; there are 'thumbnail' maps in the margin.

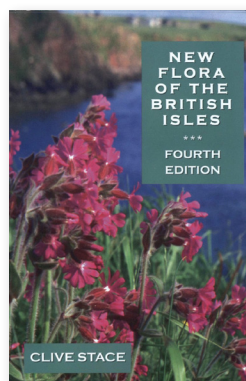
### Going further

It goes without saying that plants only flower for a short time of the year, so to really get to grips with identification it is a good idea to be able to identify plants solely by their vegetative parts. The best guide for this is undoubtedly *The Vegetative Key to the British Flora* (2nd edition, 2020) by John Poland and Eric Clement. This provides identification to nearly 3,000



taxa (including many aliens). It is in the form of a series of extensive and innovative keys, sometimes accompanied by line artworks. It has to be said that despite the excellence of the book this is not one for a beginner to plunge straight into. It takes some practice to use and the terminology, although precise, can be a little daunting. The latest edition has all the new Stace names.

The standard Flora that should be on every botanist's shelf is the latest edition of the *New Flora of the British Isles* (4th edition, 2019) by Clive Stace. This is the key reference work on our plants, but like the last book is text-based and illustrated with occasional line artworks and sets of monochrome photographs. The comprehensive nature of the Flora is reflected in its 1,266 pages.



### Further advice

There have been numerous lists of preferred field guides over the years, but in the end it is a matter of personal choice: some feel photographs provide a more instant connection with the actual plant, others that clear artwork is better at portraying key diagnostic characters. The best guide, of course, is an experienced botanist who can enthuse you with their knowledge. BSBI and its county flora groups run many field meetings up and down the country. Why not go along and enjoy one of these and find out what books others use? You can then start to build up your own set of trusted field guides. But beware that this can be the start of another hoard of botanical books!

### References

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