

Illustrated field guides to the wild flowers of Great Britain and Ireland

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The University of the Third Age in Cambridge, U.K., has a Botany Group for members wanting to learn about the wild flora of Britain; it has field meetings around Cambridge, an annual residential meeting further afield and winter lectures. This is a modified version of a document listing field guides recommended as suitable for its members. I review below some modern field guides to the vascular flora of Great Britain and Ireland: Part **A** treats more comprehensive

works (six titles), Part **B** suggests books for beginners (four titles), Part **C** discusses an illustrated vegetative key, and Part **D** describes some laminated identification cards. Parts **A** and **B** list the books in order of their publication dates. The main focus is on flowering herbs, as implied by “wild flowers” in the title; coverage of other growth forms (shrubs and trees) and of special groups (grasses, sedges, rushes, pteridophytes etc.) varies. Excluded from this review are books on trees, such as *Trees of Britain and Europe* by Margot & Roland Spohn (2008; see *Taxon* 60: 1809), special groups such as orchids and works that do not cover Britain and Ireland generally, e.g. Christopher Grey-Wilson & Marjorie Blamey's *Alpine flowers of Britain and Europe*, 2nd edition (1995; see *Taxon* 49: 623). Most of the works discussed here are obtainable from Summerfield Books (www.summerfieldbooks.com), the official book suppliers for the Botanical Society of Britain & Ireland, sometimes at prices lower than those given below.

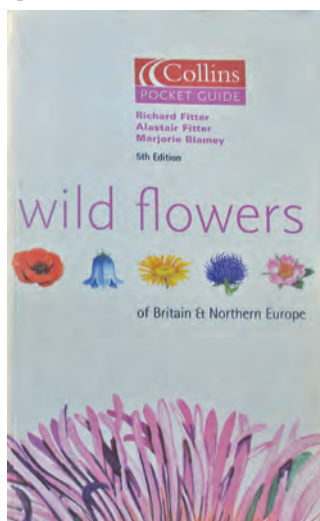
Key: + (before a work), guide also covers part or the whole of northern Europe; **HB**, hardback/hardbound; **PB**, paperback/paperbound; **PC**, plastic-coated cover.

(A) More comprehensive field guides

(1) + **Fitter, Richard, Fitter, Alastair** (text) & **Blamey, Marjorie** (col. paintings). 1996. *Wild flowers of Britain and northern Europe*. 5th ed. HarperCollins Publishers, London (www.harpercollins.co.uk) (series: *Collins pocket guides*, unnum.). 352 pp., 190 × 115 mm, ISBN 9780002200622 PB, £14.99, but o.p. [Eds. 1–4 1974, 1974, 1978, 1985, as *The wild flowers of Britain and northern Europe*.] – With map of area covered, 5-p. intro., 5-p. glossary, 1-p. biblio., 21 pp. separate indexes Eng., Lat. pl. names.

Comment: Very good paintings opposite brief but generally good descriptions (with a few distinctive characters noted in italics) follow 12 pages of ingenious pictorial keys. British and Irish species are asterisked. Coverage is fairly comprehensive apart

from grasses, sedges, rushes, pteridophytes etc.: over 1450 species are illustrated in colour and nearly 2000 described in systematic order (apart from 14 pages of “waterweeds” and four of “selected aliens”). There are short appendices (for additional species of seven genera and of introduced trees and shrubs), notes on plant ecology (with lists of characteristic plants of various habitats) and on plant photography, and brief lists of societies to join and of further reading. This is a handy book for use in the field, now much

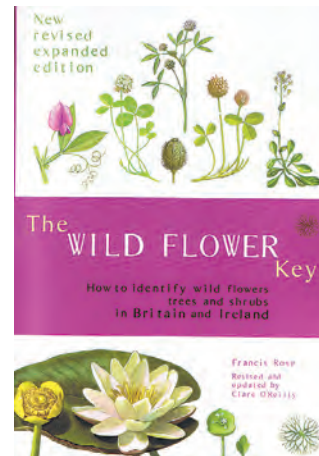


improved and updated. Earlier editions had only 336 pages, “waterweeds” illustrated in B&W, no “selected aliens” and nine pages of “additional species” with cross-references to the main text and a few line drawings.

(2) **Rose, Francis**. 2006. *The wild flower key: How to identify wild flowers, trees and shrubs in Britain and Ireland*. 2nd ed. Rev. by Clare O'Reilly (w/ 6 illustrators). Frederick Warne, London

(now in the Penguin Group: www.us.penguin.com). 576 pp., 190 × 130 mm, ISBN 9780723251750 PB, PC, £25.00. [1st ed. 1981.] – With 19-p. intro. (incl. biblio.), 11-p. ill. glossary, single 14-p. index pl. names.

Comment: This book claims to be “the only field guide that combines comprehensive keys with colour illustrations [and] with

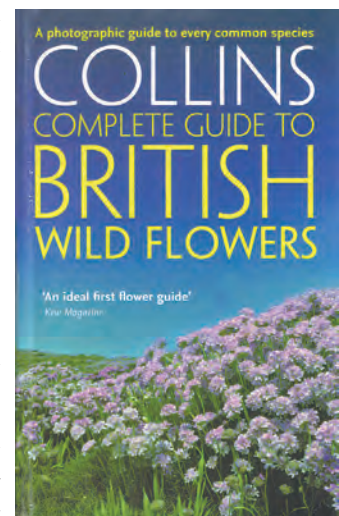


vegetative keys to plants not in flower”. (Note that *The vegetative key to the British flora* was published in April 2009; see Part C below and Rudolf Schmid's review in the August 2009 *Taxon*.) The keys are very good. Over 1600 species (including trees and shrubs but not, except in the vegetative keys, grasses, sedges, rushes, pteridophytes etc.) are briefly but well described and illustrated by rather variable paintings, some fragmentary. “As in edition one, it

was deemed not necessary always to illustrate the whole plant but only the essential parts.” This is sometimes rather unsatisfactory. The book also contains a list of abbreviations and symbols, a general key to families, eight vegetative keys by habitats, new ID tips (in boxes), some family and generic keys in the text, a new table of regional ancient woodland indicator plants and an index to the keys and the ID tips. The back cover has a 150-mm ruler. The book weighs 0.75 kg. The plastic over-cover protects it well in the field.

(3) **Sterry, Paul** (w/ colour photos by Sterry & al.). 2006 (reissued 2008 w/ new cover photo). *Collins complete British wild flowers*. (2008 reissue: *Collins complete guide to British wild flowers*.) HarperCollins Publishers, London (www.harpercollins.co.uk) (series: *Collins complete guides*, unnum.). 304 pp., 210 × 135 mm, ISBN 9780007204694 (2006) PB, o.p., ISBN 9780007236848 (2008) PB, £16.99. – With 18-p. well-ill. intro. (incl. 3-p. glossary), single 16-p. index pl. names.

Comment: Described as “an easy-to-use guide to over 1100 species of British wild flowers” and “ideal for beginners and intermediate naturalists”, this book has high-quality colour photos on the right-hand pages and on the left-hand pages succinct accounts following a standard pattern (three “scarcity ratings” where applicable, height in centimetres or metres, short overall description, habitat, flowers, fruits, leaves and status, sometimes with distinguishing features italicised), small distribution maps (in which “the intensity of the colour gives an indication of abundance”) and some supplementary illustrations. The book is arranged “by and large” in systematic order (with an 8-page section on water



plants) and includes most rushes, sedges and grasses (but not pteridophytes) and shrubs (but not trees). The excellent introductory matter includes “short cuts to flower identity” (with photos of, for example, “4-petalled flowers” and “tubular or fused flowers”), illustrated accounts of flowers, of fruits and seeds and of leaves, and explanatory sections on “habitats” and “conservation”. At the end 17 pages describe and illustrate the special species of 13 “botanical hotspots” and there are brief lists of further reading and useful organisations. The back cover has a 200-mm ruler.

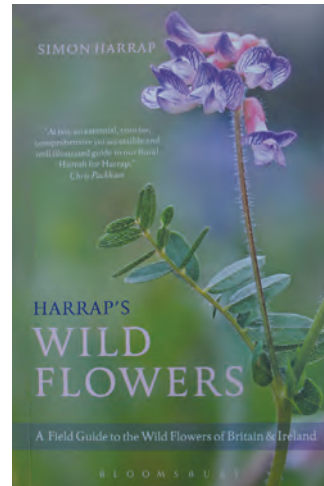
(4) + **Streeter, David** (w/ 4 illustrators). 2009 (HB), 2010 (PB). *Collins flower guide*. HarperCollins Publishers, London (www.harpercollins.co.uk). 704 pp., 195 × 135 mm (PB), ISBN 9780007106219 HB, £30.00, ISBN 9780007183890 PB, £19.99. – With map Watsonian vice-counties, 4-p. intro., 1-p. biblio., 5-p. ill. glossary, single 15-p. index pl. names.

Comment: This guide is close to what it says it is – “complete” – but for Britain and Ireland, not for Europe! Coverage is for over 1900 species (including trees, shrubs, pteridophytes etc.), a very few of which appear to be absent from the British Isles but present in northern Europe. It is well set out in strictly taxonomic order and has superb, simple, easy-to-follow keys to families, genera and species of the larger genera. The illustrations, of mediocre quality overall, are numerous and even include 21 of the most common eyebrights (*Euphrasia* spp.), though oddly

“Eyebright” is not indexed! The species descriptions are full and easily readable, but the excellent distribution maps of Blamey & al. (see 6 below) are lacking. The paperback has a 180-mm ruler inside the front cover (absent in the hardback). Even the paperback version weighs 1.2 kg, so one needs to be fit to carry the book for a whole day!

(5) **Harrap, Simon** (text, photos). June 2013. *Harrap's wild flowers: A field guide to the wild flowers of Britain & Ireland*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc (www.bloomsbury.com/uk). 416 pp., 215 × 140 mm, ISBN 9781408113608 PB, £16.99. – With 11-p. intro. (incl. well-ill. 6-p. glossary), single 8-p. index pl. names.

Comment: This new field guide by a Norfolk botanist has much in common with Paul Sterry's (3 above), but it is a third larger and arguably an improvement on his book. It includes 934 species of wild flowers, shrubs and trees that are illustrated by over 2000 generally superb colour photos (remarkably all but one taken by the author). The 918 distribution maps are larger and clearer than in Sterry's book but lack the “indication of abundance”. Each page describes two or three species, accompanied by one, two or three portrait photos (sometimes supplemented by others of leaves, flowers and/or fruits), a map and a summary table showing growth (e.g. “annual to perennial”), height (in centimetres or metres), flowering time, status (e.g. “native and introduction”) and altitude (in metres). The taxa are arranged mainly in the new systematic order of the third (2010) edition of Clive Stace's *New flora of the British Isles* (with separate sections for aquatic plants and for trees and shrubs).

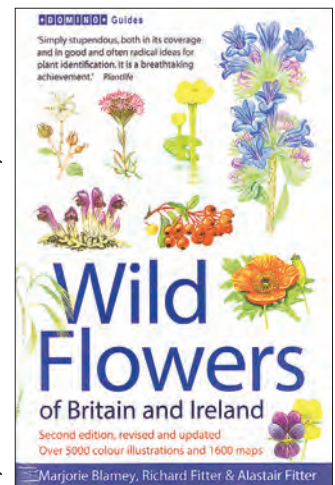


Descriptions follow a standard pattern: frequency and habitat, distinctive characteristics, a fuller description (the last two with distinguishing features italicised), and in some cases a brief description of one or more similar species. English and Latin names of plants also follow Stace (2010), though in the former Harrap has “reduced the use of hyphens”. The introductory matter includes an explanation of the laws affecting wild plants and a one-page explanation of the species accounts.

(The example featured oddly does not match the account later given for the same species!) Instead of a key to families an ingenious innovation – 144 small flower portraits inside the covers – illustrates groups of plants (e.g. “violets”, actually including pansies, one of which is pictured) with their page numbers (e.g. “89–93”). Inside the front cover there is a 200-mm ruler.

(6) + **Blamey, Marjorie** (paintings), **Fitter, Richard & Fitter, Alastair** (text). 2013. *Wild flowers of Britain and Ireland*. 2nd ed. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc (www.bloomsbury.com/uk) (series: *Domino guides*, unnum.). 482 pp., 216 × 138 mm, ISBN 9781408179505 PB, £18.99. [1st ed. 2003. *The wild flowers of Britain and Ireland: The complete guide to the British and Irish flora*. A. & C. Black.] – With 7-p. intro., 4-p. ill. glossary, separate indexes Eng., Lat. pl. names.

Comment: The new edition of this book, originally described as the result of “three lifetimes’ study and love of wild flowers”, has been “fully revised to take into account recent taxonomic changes, as well as changes in status and distribution”, with over 5000 detailed colour paintings of more than 1900 species, mainly on right-hand pages, and asterisks for rarity ratings, brief descriptions (with “important aspects” italicised), flowering periods and distributions (with more than 1600 excellent “mini-maps”) on left-hand pages; the descriptions are better than the paintings, some of which do not suggest the plant portrayed. The Latin names of plants now follow the third (2010) edition of



Clive Stace's *New flora of the British Isles*, but the English names do not strictly adhere to it. This guide includes grasses, pteridophytes etc. and many aliens, making it a virtually comprehensive account of the current British and Irish flora, mainly in more or less systematic order, but with aquatic plants and trees and larger shrubs treated separately and with grasses, sedges and rushes rather stupidly “lumped” together when they could easily have been kept separate. Some genera (e.g. *Cardamine*) are split between pages

some distance apart because they have differently coloured flowers. There are illustrated sections for “specialities of the Isles of Scilly and West Cornwall”, “Irish specialities” and “extinct British and Irish plants”, lists of “further reading” and “societies to join” and, in the text, some useful tabular keys (but no key to families) and a two-page illustrated introduction to grasses, sedges and rushes. The book is rather heavy.

(B) Field guides recommended for beginners

(7) + **Moore, Peter D.** (w/ paintings by 5 artists). 1996 (reissued PB Mar. 2000 w/ new cover photo). *The Mitchell Beazley pocket guide to wild flowers of Britain and Europe*. Rev. ed. Mitchell Beazley Publishers (www.octopusbooks.co.uk) (series: *Mitchell Beazley pocket guides*, unnum.). 192 pp., 190 × 88 mm, ISBN 9780855332686 (1996) HB, £3.95, ISBN 9781840002713 (2000) PB, £7.99, but both o.p. [1st ed. 1980, HB with dust jacket.] – With 10-p. intro., single 11-p. index pl. names.

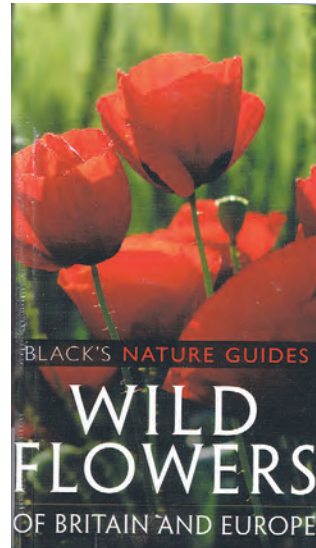
Comment: This small, narrow book, latterly in thin card covers, illustrates and describes over 1000 species in systematic order. The introductory matter includes a glossary with line drawings and an ingenious six-page key to families arranged in groups A–L. The paintings are somewhat “wishy-washy” but accurate. The descriptions are very brief but helpful. There are also habitat symbols. Coverage is astonishing for so small a book, which has been improved from the earlier printings, with updated nomenclature. Trees, larger shrubs, grasses, sedges, rushes, pteridophytes etc. are not included.

(8) **Akeroyd, John** (w/ photos by Bob Gibbons). 2004. *Wild flowers*. Rev. ed. HarperCollins Publishers, London (www.harpercollins.co.uk) (series: *Collins wild guides*, unnum.). 256 pp., 170 × 100 mm, ISBN 9780007177936 PB, £8.99, but o.p. [1st ed. 1996.] – With 8-p. intro., 5-p. index Eng. pl. names only.

Comment: This excellent beginners’ guide treats 240 main species in systematic order. The introductory matter includes “identification of wild flowers” (with the principal technical terms in bold type), “the habitats of wild flowers” and “conservation”. Each species has its own page including a paragraph describing its general habit and giving some key facts about its ecology, distribution, uses etc., a colour photo, a grid with months of flowering shaded, an “ID fact file” describing height, flowers, leaves, fruits and “lookalikes”, and a map of the European distribution. “A silhouette at the top of the page gives a thumbnail sketch of the shape and colour of the flower or flower cluster.”

(9) + **Spohn, Margot** (text) & **Spohn, Roland** (ill.). 2008. *Wild flowers of Britain and Europe*. Trans. from the Ger. by Suzanne Kirkbright. A. & C. Black, London (www.bloomsbury.com/uk) (series: *Black’s nature guides*, unnum.). 320 pp., 195 × 116 mm, ISBN 9781408101537 PB, £9.99. [Ger. ed. 2007 by Kosmos, Stuttgart.] – With 12-p. ill. intro., single 6-p. index pl. names; no biblio. For another work in the series see first paragraph above and *Taxon* 60: 1809.

Comment: With 2054 clear colour photos and illustrations, this guide provides plenty of visual assistance to identify the over 450 species covered. These are arranged by five flower colours and then in each by four flower types (e.g. “no more than four petals” and “bilaterally symmetrical flowers”); two cover flaps clarify these. The five colour sections describing taxa have page numbers in the middles of the outer margins, with colour coding and



symbols of flower types. There are one or two species per page; each has its English and Latin names followed by family (in English), height (in centimetres), months of flowering and “form” (annual, biennial or perennial), with a poison symbol if appropriate. The main colour photo is of the “typical appearance” of the plant; close-ups show the flower or inflorescence and often other plant-parts; all these illustrations are labelled with brief descriptions and a few “key features” are also listed. A small habitat photo has the habitat described below it. The main paragraph of text provides background information rather than a description. Some species also have a “Did you know?” box.

(10) + **Fletcher, Neil**. 2010. *Wild flowers*. 2nd ed. Dorling Kindersley, London (www.dk.co.uk) (series: *DK pocket nature*, unnum.). 296 pp., 191 × 100 mm, ISBN 9781405350006 PB, £9.99. [1st ed. 2004.] – With R.S.P.B. logo on front cover, 6-p. ill. intro., 1-p. glossary, single 6-p. index pl. names.

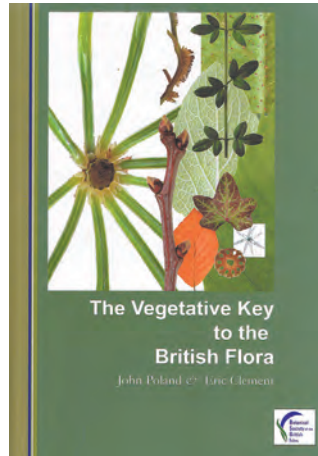
Comment: This attractively presented book is rather similar to the last one. It claims to cover “the 440 most commonly seen wild flower species in northwest Europe” in “four chapters based on flower colour”, within which “the flowers are broadly organized by family”. Each page treats usually two but sometimes only one species, giving for each taxon a paragraph of descriptive prose, a box with “other key information”, a close-up colour photo, additional photos of selected plant-parts, a diminutive photo of habitat, a distribution map for north-western Europe and a sketch of plant form (labelled “perennial”, “biennial” or “annual”) next to a column representing the height of the book (19 cm). The choice of species has clearly been influenced by their attractiveness: this guide includes several orchid species that are extremely rare in Britain and four gentian species, only two of them British and both very local.

(C) Illustrated vegetative key

(11) **Poland, John & Clement, Eric J.** (w/ 6 artists). Apr. 2009. *The vegetative key to the British flora: A new approach to naming British vascular plants based on vegetative characters*. John Poland, Southampton (www.hantsecology.co.uk), in assoc. w/ the Botanical Society of the British Isles, London (www.bsbi.org.uk). [vi], 526 pp., 26 pp. pls. (col.), text ill. (B&W), 211 × 148 mm, ISBN 9780956014405 PB, £24.99. – With 1-p. biblio., 4-p. intro. (use of book), divisional key, use of keys, group keys, symbols & abbrs., 7-p. glossary, 5-p. expanded ill. glossary (w/ a few line drawings), single 32-p. index pl. names.

Comment: “Conventional field guides only work when you have flowers or fruit; something all botanists find rather frustrating when out in the field. Here for the first time is a volume that differs. Fortunately, it is often simpler and easier to identify a plant using vegetative characters than from flowers alone (yes, really!) and the keys work just as well on plants in flower. This key

enables the user to easily identify over 3,000 native and alien plants without flowers or fruit, with nothing more than a hand lens ... within three turns of a page, often in under 60 seconds (due to the novel structure of the keys).” So claim the authors of this remarkable book, which is increasingly being used not just by botanists but also by others such as entomologists and ecological consultants, who often must do surveys when plants are not in flower. After the introductory matter (including preface, acknowledgements and bibliography) 471 of the 526 text pages are devoted to the keys and some helpful line drawings; the keys are “not strictly dichotomous” but may offer “three or more options” and they are helpfully indented. Plants are first assigned to 21 “major divisions” lettered A–U, which are then subdivided into “groups” designated by two letters (e.g. FJ for plants with \pm orbicular floating leaves > 10 mm wide, within F, which signifies “obligate water plant”). “A few genera or aggregates of species form natural groups that key out in more than one place. ... keys to these groups have been removed to a ‘Selected Groups’ section” on pages 402–479, designated by three or more letters, usually suggestive of the group concerned (e.g. BER for *Berberis*, VIO for *Viola*). Some other species also key out in more than one place. The back cover has a 200-mm ruler.



sprays, arranged in a “trail” with yes/no questions and arrows, and described on four sides of tables including drawings of flowers, fruits and seeds.

Guide to orchids (Gulliver & Gulliver, 2008, OP121, £3.80): 12 sides with 69 species, subspecies and hybrids illustrated and a good key.

Key to common ferns (Merryweather, 2005, OP94, £3.00): four sides of paintings of 38 of the 53 pteridophytes (ferns and allied plants) with four sides of text (mainly keys).

Guide to common grasses (Gardener & Roberts, 2010, OP136, £3.00): 30 common species illustrated in four sides of plates, a tabular “lateral key” based on 18 alternative “character descriptions” grouped in seven sections, and explanatory drawings.

The F.S.C. website also lists several charts illustrating the plants of various habitats (e.g. saltmarsh).

(D) Identification cards

The Field Studies Council produces a series of folding laminated identification cards (see www.field-studies-council.org/publications/fold-out-charts.aspx), including:

Describing flowers: A guide to the structure of flowers and to their identification features (Bebbington & Bebbington, 1997, OP42, £3.00): eight sides, including leaves and fruits.

The tree name trail: A key to common trees (Oldham & Roberts, 1999, OP51, £3.80): 12 sides covering about 50 species, illustrated on six sides by paintings of flowering and/or fruiting

