

## INTRODUCTORY GUIDES TO PLANTS OF NW ENGLAND

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These guides are intended to help newcomers to make a start in naming particular groups of plants. Many good books, illustrations and introductory keys are of course available for almost any sort of plants, and these guides are intended to supplement rather than replace them. The particular features of the guides which, it is hoped, will be helpful to beginners are

- they are restricted to species likely to be found in S Lancashire, W Yorkshire and Cheshire
- they are restricted to commoner species - roughly, those likely to be encountered several times a year by the average naturalist
- they sacrifice fine detail and precision to simplicity

It is **important to note**, therefore, that the guides will not be useful (and indeed might be seriously misleading) outside the specified area. In particular, since most of the area covered has fairly acid rocks and soils plants of limestone and other basic substrates are de-emphasised; strictly coastal plants are likewise largely neglected.

Note that it may not be possible to name every plant encountered, since many scarcer species are omitted and some unusual forms may be omitted for the sake of simplicity. Furthermore, because ease of use is emphasised over precise detail the guides may occasionally lead to errors. If definite identification is important, descriptions and illustrations of the putative species in the standard floras should be consulted. This advice is (or should be) attached to all “keys” for plant identification, even those intended for experts, but is often unwisely ignored; it is especially relevant to these simple guides

In most cases the guide is supplemented by brief notes on scarcer species, in particular on how they differ from the commoner species included in the guide. Absolute beginners are urged to ignore these notes: they can do so with almost total impunity because these scarcer species will seldom be encountered - generally, far fewer than 1% of plants encountered will be in this category. However, when some familiarity has been gained, it may be of interest to look for the distinguishing characters of these scarcer species. Needless to say, the supplementary notes on scarce species are very far from sufficient for accurate determination and the warning in the previous paragraph is again emphasised.

Experience suggests that a major difficulty for beginners using plant guides and keys arises from the difficulty of exactly interpreting the text (without prior experience it can be difficult, for example, to decide whether a leaf is “bluntly” or “finely” pointed). For this reason, the guides are accompanied by explanatory thumbnail sketches. These are *not* to be regarded as definitive illustrations of a particular plant, even when labelled with a species name, but merely as help in interpreting the decisions required by the guide.

Most guides (at present) are “eliminative keys”. Start with the description labelled “1”. If it conflicts *in any respect* with the characters of your plant pass on to the description “2”, and so on. For example, if it says “flowers blue, plant less than 10 cm tall” and your plant has blue flowers and is 15 cm tall, that is not a match and you should pass on to the next description. When you find an exact match read through *in turn*, the species descriptions that follow until you get to one that exactly matches your plant.

A section with many species may be subdivided into subsections a,b,...comprising plants with common characteristics specified by the heading of the section. If your plant does not agree with the description at the head of subsection a pass on to subsection b, and so on.

It is important to work through the key from the *beginning*. A description like “plant with pink petals and thorns” may exactly fit your plant but there may be several species that fit this description which “key out” earlier. If you neglect this warning, and the advice to check against illustrations and descriptions, you might make some spectacular misidentifications!

We would be glad to be told of any errors which have crept into the keys, and to receive any suggestions for clarifying or otherwise improving them. Please inform the general editor at [john.lowell@btinternet.com](mailto:john.lowell@btinternet.com).