


BLOOMSBURY POCKET GUIDE TO

WILD FLOWERS

BOB GIBBONS


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INTRODUCTION

This book is intended as a handy guide that can readily be taken out into the countryside and used to identify some of the most attractive, abundant and conspicuous flowers of Britain and adjacent parts of Europe. It does not, of course, cover all the flowers of this area, and the selected species are ones that you are generally most likely to see. Where appropriate, a selection of similar species is included with the main species.

The order of species within the book follows the most widely used taxonomic system. At present, botanical naming is in a state of considerable flux because of the vast amounts of new information arising from DNA analysis of plants. The process is by no means complete but has already led to much reclassifying and renaming of species. This book follows the nomenclature of the *New Flora of the British Isles*, third edition, by C. Stace (see Bibliography and Resources, p. 189); older names are also given where they are still widely used.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The species are described in a standardised way, comprising a simple description of the plant, its flowering time, usual habitat preferences and broad distribution within the British Isles including Eire. What is included in the description varies – the salient points that distinguish each species are covered. For example, in the mulleins there is a description of the colour of the hairs on the filaments of the stamens because this feature is important for identifying mulleins, but this characteristic is not described elsewhere. The flowering time indicated is the main period of flowering, but plants are likely to flower latest further north and at high altitudes, and flowering periods vary from year to year. In addition, small numbers of flowers may be found well outside the normal period of flowering, so the dates given should be treated as a guide only. The habitat preferences given are the most frequent ones and may not cover all the situations in which a plant occurs, and plants may grow in different habitats in different countries.

Following the description of the main species on the page, a number of similar or closely related species may be described. The

Foxglove flowers *Digitalis purpurea*

descriptions are short, simply outlining the key differences from the main species.

The book is intended primarily as an accessible visual guide, with the photographs giving the primary clue to each flower's identity, to be confirmed by study of the more detailed descriptions and similar species where applicable.

THE STRUCTURE OF FLOWERS

Flowers vary hugely in their form and colour, depending on how they are pollinated, where they grow and how they have evolved. It is not possible here to describe and explain the whole range of flower structures, but there are some simple, general rules that can be followed.

Flowers consist of several whorls of parts that may or may not be symmetrically arranged. The outermost whorl (which is often, but not necessarily, green) is known as the **calyx**. This is made up of individual **sepals** that may be separate or fused into a tube with just the tips free, indicating the number of sepals making up the tube. The primary function of the calyx is to protect the bud, though in many species the sepals are adapted to be part of the pollination mechanism. In some species the calyx may be missing or adapted to be similar to the petals – for example in anemones, where there is no obvious calyx, and in many orchids, where the sepals are petal-like and are significant parts of the insect-attracting mechanism. In a few plant groups, notably the rose and mallow families, there is an additional epicalyx outside the calyx, but this is the exception rather than the rule. Its presence can be helpful in identifying these families.

The next whorl in towards the centre of a flower is composed of the **petals**, which are most commonly what we think of as the flower. They are frequently highly coloured and conspicuous, and form the key feature in attracting insects to pollinate. The form of petals, and their arrangement, varies enormously. One common form is a simple ring of roughly equal petals as, for example, in cranesbills and buttercups; in other species, such as the bellflowers, the petals are fused into a tube. In many groups, the petals have evolved individually and are no longer all similar in shape – in the pea family, one petal forms the large raised standard and two form projecting wings, enclosing two more fused into a keel. An extreme variation occurs in the orchids, especially in the genus *Ophrys*, such as the Bee Orchid on p. 181. Here the three sepals are usually strongly coloured

and resemble petals; the lowest petal, known as the labellum or lip, has developed into a form resembling the body of a bumblebee, while the remaining two petals are small, looking something like the antennae of an insect. The whole is part of a complex process of duping male bees and wasps into thinking that the plant is a female insect ready for mating – a process known as pseudocopulation.

Within the ring of petals lie the reproductive parts of the flower. The male parts are the **stamens**, usually each consisting of an **anther**, where the pollen is produced, and a **filament** – that is, its stalk. The male genes are carried in the pollen by wind, insects or other means. The female parts are more variable, made up of one to many **carpels**, each containing one or more **ovaries**. A carpel normally has a stalk-like style that terminates in a receptive **stigma**, where the pollen settles and germinates. The number and arrangement of these parts is an important component of plant identification.

The leaves of plants are also important in their identification, particularly their shape, whether they are toothed or not and whether stalked or not, and whether they are arranged in opposite pairs, alternately up the stem, or in some other way. The presence, absence and shape of two little leaf-like structures at the base of the leaf stalk – known as **stipules** – are also important.

Wild plants are under threat everywhere, and many have declined alarmingly. Please pick them only if necessary, never dig them up and join as many wildlife conservation organizations as you can.

The distinctive flowers of Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*

WHITE WATERLILY

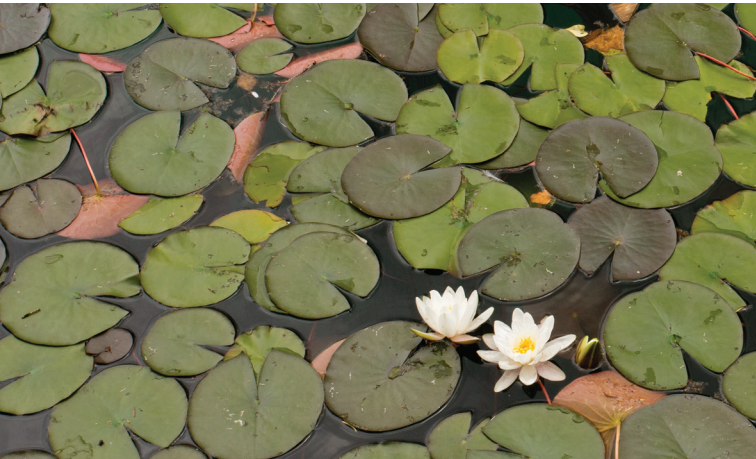
Nymphaea alba

One of northern Europe's most distinctive and attractive wild plants, White Waterlily is an aquatic perennial with large, leathery, almost circular floating leaves that have veins radiating from the centre, where the stalk joins the blade. The flowers are very large, up to 20cm across, scented, with numerous white petals, some of which are longer than the four green sepals. They open fully only in bright conditions. The fruits are ovoid to spherical and fleshy, though rarely seen because they ripen below the water's surface. When mature, the fruits sink to the bottom and decay to release the seeds.

FLOWERING TIME June–August.

DISTRIBUTION Widespread and common in lakes, ponds and canals throughout Britain and Ireland wherever there is suitable habitat.

SIMILAR SPECIES Yellow Waterlily *Nuphar lutea* is easily distinguished when in flower by its smaller yellow flowers, with both the flowers and fruits held well above water level. The leaves differ in being more oval, with a herringbone pattern of veins. The species is widespread in similar habitats throughout the region, except uplands.



White Waterlily *Nymphaea alba*

MARSH MARIGOLD

Caltha palustris

A familiar spring flower of damp and marshy places, Marsh Marigold, or Kingcups, is a robust hairless perennial up to 50cm tall, with thick, hollow stems and shiny, kidney-shaped leaves, of which the lower are stalked, the upper unstalked. The flowers are large, 2–5cm across, and bright golden-yellow. They are made up of five or more petal-like sepals (if you look underneath the flower, there is no obvious green calyx, which helps to distinguish this plant from buttercups, *see* p. 18). The fruits form a cluster of distinctive pod-like, multi-seeded, erect follicles. Like buttercups, the plants are poisonous, and the flowers have occasionally been used to produce a yellow dye. Marsh Marigold is frequently grown in gardens as an attractive ornamental plant, often in double-flowered forms.

FLOWERING TIME March–July.

DISTRIBUTION Widespread and frequently abundant in a variety of wet places, both shaded and sunny, including marshes, fens, wet woodland and pastures, from sea level up to at least 1,000m in mountain areas. Generally more abundant in western areas, where suitable habitats are more frequent.

Marsh Marigold *Caltha palustris*

WOOD ANEMONE

Anemone nemorosa

Wood Anemones are well known and much loved as one of the first and prettiest flowers of spring, often seen in great abundance in woodland before the leaves of the trees emerge. They are low-growing, usually hairless perennials, rarely taller than 25cm, spreading by rhizomes to form dense clumps. The flowers are white, though often tinged with pink or purple, and about 2–4cm across. As in Marsh Marigold (and some other plants in the buttercup family), the five or more 'petals' are actually sepals, with no green calyx below them. The leaves are deeply divided into three or more lobes, sometimes appearing after the flowers, then disappearing quite soon after flowering.

FLOWERING TIME March–May.

DISTRIBUTION

A common plant of woodland, particularly ancient woodland, Wood Anemone flowers spectacularly in early spring. It may also appear in non-woodland habitats such as pastures, hedge-banks and cliff-top grassland, often indicating the past presence of woodland. It is widely cultivated in gardens, especially in the strongly coloured pink and purplish varieties.

Wood Anemone *Anemone nemorosa*

STINKING HELLEBORE

Helleborus foetidus

This strong-growing, evergreen perennial up to 80cm tall has an unpleasant smell, as its name suggests. There are no basal leaves, but the stem leaves are palmately divided with simple, narrow, dark green, toothed lobes. The flowers are yellowish-green with a red or purple rim, nodding, bell-shaped and 1–3cm across, usually growing in clusters. The bracts that support the flowers are simple and undivided. A cluster of three inflated, beaked fruits, or follicles, develops in the centre after flowering.

FLOWERING TIME January–April.

DISTRIBUTION An uncommon plant of woodland and scrub, mainly on calcareous soil. Local and mainly in western Britain (though also common as a garden escape); absent from Ireland as a native.

SIMILAR SPECIES Green Hellebore *H. viridis* differs in having basal leaves, deeply divided bracts and more open, greener flowers. It is an uncommon native in western Britain.

Stinking Hellebore *Helleborus foetidus*

TRAVELLER'S JOY

Clematis vitalba

Traveller's Joy is a strong-growing, robust, deciduous, perennial woody climber that in favourable conditions can achieve heights of around 30m, reaching to the top of whatever supports it. The leaves are pinnate, with a few toothed leaflets and twining stems and stalks. The flowers are greenish-white, fragrant and 1–2cm across, grouped into large, dense inflorescences. The four petal-like structures are actually sepals. The plant is most distinctive after flowering, when the fruits develop long, silky plumes (hence another common name for the plant, Old Man's Beard), which remain conspicuous from late summer into winter. Collectively, the plants are highly visible and distinctive.

FLOWERING TIME July–August.

DISTRIBUTION Widespread and common in lowland calcareous places, where it is sometimes considered a weed.

Traveller's Joy *Clematis vitalba*

CREEPING BUTTERCUP

Ranunculus repens

Creeping Buttercup is an all-too-familiar plant of gardens and almost any other habitat, where it forms large, dense patches due to its creeping runners that spread and root. It is a hairy perennial up to about 50cm tall, with triangular leaves each divided into three lobes, of which the central one is stalked. The flowers are golden-yellow, on furrowed stalks, with a variable number of petals, usually between five and seven; the sepals are erect and pressed against the petals.

FLOWERING TIME May–August.

DISTRIBUTION Common as a garden weed throughout Britain and Ireland, it can also be found in grassland, open woodland and arable fields, most frequently where the soil is damp or poorly drained.

SIMILAR SPECIES There are many other similar species of buttercup, broadly the same in appearance but differing in details. One of the most common, Meadow Buttercup *R. acris*, is more erect, not creeping, with the central lobe of the leaf unstalked and with unfurrowed flower stalks. Another common species, Bulbous Buttercup *R. bulbosus*, likes drier situations. It has a bulbous base to the stem and the flower sepals are strongly reflexed back down the stem. All three species thrive in open, grassy habitats.

Creeping Buttercup *Ranunculus repens*