



## Identifying Plant Families

This handout will help you learn the key features of different major plant families.

Start to learn these key characteristics to help you narrow down identification of unknown plants in the field.

### **BUTTERCUP FAMILY**

(*Ranunculaceae*)

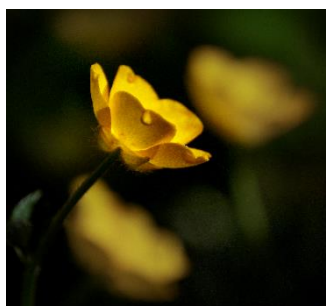
- Mostly herbs
- Alternate leaves
- Flowers usually have 5 petals
- Flowers usually have 5 sepals

Common species include:

- Buttercups
- Marsh marigold
- Lesser celandine
- Crowfoots
- Anemones
- Spearworts (lesser & greater)
- Clematis



Marsh marigold



Creeping buttercup



Lesser celandine

### **CAMPION FAMILY**

(*Caryophyllaceae*)

- All herbs
- Leaves in opposite pairs, unlobed, untoothed
- Flowers usually have 5 petals
- Flowers usually have 5 sepals
- Flowers in cymes  
(group of flowers, terminal flower opens first)
- Single capsule fruit

Common species include:

- Campions and catchflies
- Chickweeds
- Stitchworts (lesser & greater)
- Mouse-ears
- Spurreys and Pearlworts



Greater stitchwort



Red campion



Ragged robin



Chickweed



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## DOCK FAMILY

(*Polygonaceae*)

- All herbs
- Alternate, simple leaves
- Tubular, translucent stipules
- 3-6 indistinguishable tepals
- Hard, 3-angled seeds

Common species include:

- Docks
- Sorrels
- Bistorts and persicarias



Redshank



Sheep's sorrel



Broad-leaved dock

## GERANIUM FAMILY

(*Geraniaceae*)

- All herbs
- Leaves usually alternate
- Flowers have 5 petals
- Flowers have 5 sepals
- Five-lobed capsule fruit

Common species include:

- Cranesbills
- Storksbills
- Herb Robert



Doves foot cranesbill



Common storksbill



Herb Robert



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## **CABBAGE (CRUCIFER) FAMILY**

(*Brassicaceae*)

- All herbs
- Alternate leaves
- No stipules
- Flowers have 4 petals in a cross
- Flowers have 4 sepals
- Many cultivated vegetables



Wild cabbage

Common species include:

- Cabbages and mustards
- Radishes
- Cresses
- Cuckoo flower
- Stocks and rockets
- Kales



Field pennycress



Cuckoo flower



Garlic mustard

## **CARROT (UMBELLIFER) FAMILY**

(*Apiaceae*)

- All herbs
- Leaves usually alternate with sheathing, inflated leaf-stalk bases
- Flowers have 5 separate petals
- Flowers small, in umbels



Cow parsley flowers and leaves

Common species include:

- Parsleys's and chervils
- Celery and ground elder
- Hogweeds and alexanders
- Angelica
- Parsnips, carrots and fennel



Pignut



Alexanders



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## **BEDSTRAW FAMILY**

(*Rubiaceae*)

- All herbs
- Square stems
- Leaves in whorls
- Flowers small, in clusters

Common species include:

- Bedstraws
- Cleavers
- Woodruff



Lady's bedstraw



Woodruff



Cleavers



Heath bedstraw

## **PEA FAMILY**

(*Fabaceae / Leguminosae*)

- Pea-like, five-petalled flowers
- Leaves usually trifoliate or pinnate
- Wide standard petal at top
- 5 sepals forming calyx-tube (lower parts of sepals fused)
- Fruit an elongated pod

Common species include:

- Gorses and brooms
- Clovers
- Medicks and trefoils
- Vetches, vetchlings and peas



Western gorse



Red clover



Greater bird's-foot trefoil



Kidney vetch



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## **MINT FAMILY**

(*Lamiaceae / Labiatae*)

- All herbs
- Square stems
- Leaves opposite, often toothed
- No stipules
- Tubular flowers
- Flowers usually have hood
- and prominent lower lip



Yellow archangel



White dead nettle

Common species include:

- Mints and thymes
- Dead-nettles and woundworts
- Ground-ivy and wall germander
- Self-heal and bugle



Self-heal



Ground-ivy

## **DAISY FAMILY**

(*Asteraceae / Compositae*)

- Largest family of flowering plants worldwide (23,000 species)
- All herbs in UK
- Leaves without stipules
- Flowers small in dense heads
- Petals always joined into a corolla-tube (petals fused together below forming a tube)

Common species include:

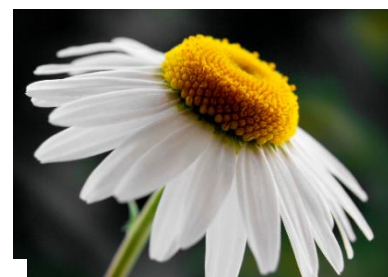
- Ragworts, groundsels and fleabanes
- Asters and daisies
- Thistles and knapweeds
- Dandelions and cat's-ears
- Hawkweeds and hawkbits
- Chamomiles
- Yarrow



Yarrow



Greater knapweed



Oxeye daisy



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## **ORCHID FAMILY**

*(Asteraceae / Compositae)*

- Over 18,000 species worldwide
- All ground-growing herbs in UK
- Flowers in spikes or racemes
- Flowers have one large petal forming a lip (called the labellum)

Examples (genus) include:

- Helleborines and Lady's-tresses
- Orchis (e.g. Early Purple Orchid)
- Ophrys (e.g. Bee Orchid)
- Dactylorhiza (e.g. Common Spotted Orchid)



Common Spotted Orchid



Bee Orchid



Marsh Helleborine



Early Purple



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