

How to ID an Unknown Plant

This handout gives you a few tips and suggestions on how to go about identifying a plant that you don't recognise. Follow the techniques below to determine any plant species you can't identify at first glance and then use the advice under point '8. Help is at hand' for consulting experts if you need a second opinion.

1. Return at a later date

Plants can look entirely different as they develop throughout the growing season and it may be possible to identify a plant during a later stage of growth.

Make a note of the grid reference of your plant (using the technique below) and return at a later date to try to identify it. You can include some notes about its characteristics and features to help you to locate the plant again, these notes may be especially useful if the area has grown since your last visit which could make it harder to find.

2. Keying out

At lunch time on your survey day or when you have some extra time to spare, find a shady, comfortable spot and get to know your field guides in depth by using the included keys to identify the plant.

Some field guides only include keys to use during the flowering period, so you may have to wait and return when the plant is flowering to identify it. Other field guides such as, *The Wild Flower Key: How to identify Wild Plants, Trees and Shrubs in Britain and Ireland* by Francis Rose – (revised edition), contain a vegetative key that doesn't rely on flowers or fruits for identification so it's possible to key out your plant outside of this period.

Each guide will have detailed instructions on how to use the included keys, read these carefully before you start to key out to avoid making mistakes.

3. Note the location

It's easy to forget where you found a plant when you revisit a site later in the year. The quickest and simplest way to note the location of a plant is to mark it on your map as accurately as possible.

You can do this by pacing out the distance/direction to the plant from a fixed, notable point such as a gate post, bench or large distinguishable tree and record this to easily navigate to that point in future. Placing a marker, such as a stick or large stone, next to your plant on the site will also help with relocating it.

4. Write a detailed description

Sometimes it might not be possible to identify the plant in the field and you will need to use other resources once you're back at home to help you to do this.

It is important to make detailed notes about the plant you're struggling to identify so that you have all the information you need when you try to identify it from home.



Your notes should include details of

- Location
- Date
- Habitat / surrounding environment – e.g. shady or sunny spot, open or enclosed area, wet or dry habitat, bordering farmland or woodland
- Associated species
- Flower size and form
- Plant height
- Plant structure – e.g. found in a tussock or a singular stand
- Width/length of leaves
- Shape and form of leaves - e.g. pinnate, lobed, compound
- Presence of any fruit including shape, colour, size
- Any distinctive scent of leaves or flowers
- Any additional features, for example, whether the stem and leaves are hairy or smooth

5. Photographing a plant

To help you identify a plant you can take some photographs showing:

- The whole plant
- A photo of its location / surrounding habitat
- A close-up of any open flower
- A close-up of the arrangement of the leaves on the stem and the leaf shape
NB. some plants will have different basal leaves to stem leaves so make sure to take a photo of both
- Any buds, seeds or distinctive features

It's important to always include a scale bar in the photographs so that relative size can be determined. If you don't have a scale bar to hand, a coin works well instead (2 pence pieces are the best)!

Remember to write a detailed description to support your photographs! These can be uploaded to different online resources or sent to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust team for help with identification, see point '8. Help is at hand' for more details.

6. Collecting a specimen

It is against the law to uproot a wild plant without the landowner's permission. However, sometimes it can be helpful to remove a single flower/flower head and/or leaf to study back at home to confirm the identity of a plant. If you only ever remove a single flower/flower head and leaf and never uproot a whole plant, then you are very unlikely to be doing any harm to the overall population.

The one exception is the orchid family, some of which are legally protected against picking, and where in some cases a single flower spike may have taken years to produce.

County Wildlife Sites are not SSSI's or NNR's so there are no designated restrictions on taking specimens, however the sites all have high ecological value and have been selected for their diversity so only collect a specimen if it is really necessary and as a last resort.





Comparing collected material with a range of reference books, illustrations and online resources can be interesting and will help you to learn. It will also allow you to seek an expert opinion.

Remember to write a detailed description to support your specimens! These can be discussed via online resources or sent to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust team for help with identification, see point '8. Help is at hand' for more details.

7. Bagging up a specimen

If you cannot identify a plant in the field and feel that it would be of great benefit to take a sample home with you there are a few tricks for making sure your specimen stays in good health on your journey home.

- Snip off a well-preserved, representative single flower/flower head and/or leaf
- Put it into a sealable plastic bag, such as a zip-top freezer bag, seal it
- When you get home put the sample in a little water straight away

The plant should last for a couple of days for you to identify it. Remember to write a detailed description to support your specimens! These can be discussed via online resources or sent to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust team for help with identification, see point '8. Help is at hand' for more details.

8. Help is at hand...

There are some great online resources that you can use to try to identify the plant. These are listed on **handout 13 "Useful Resources"**. Try to get familiar with these and use them as a first point of call for help.

If you can't find an answer through any of the listed resources you can email the photos and your notes to wild@norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk and one of the team will try to help you find out what your plant is.



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