



## Which Field Guide to Use?

A field guide is designed for ease of use by a non-botanist. Each field guide author approaches the material differently. Decisions must be made about which plants to include, how technical to be with plant terminology, what method would be best for “keying out” a plant, what type of images to use, the extent of a plant’s description to write, and whether to develop supplemental material.

The following characteristics of a field guide are ones for you to consider during your review.

### *Overall organization and layout*

Does the book present the wildflowers and supplemental material in a way that makes sense for you? There may be a single featured plant on each page, or there may be 2-4 plants per page, or the plant may be described on one page with the facing page showing one or more photos of the plant.

Are the wildflowers grouped together by color in one portion of the book--with the more detailed plant descriptions placed in another portion of the book? Or is all the information about a plant located closely together? Are the plants arranged in the book by plant family? By flower color? Some other system?

### *Illustrations*

These may be color photos, black and white line drawings, or color drawings. The illustrations or photos may show only the flowering portion of the plant or they may include the leaves and/or the overall plant structure. Does the field guide include additional drawings to highlight key identification features of the plant?

### *Descriptions*

Does the field guide provide a simple description--or a more detailed description? What parts of the plant are described (flower / inflorescence, leaf, plant dimensions, bloom time, range / habitat)? Does the description include other interesting information that appeals to you? Do the plant notes include examples of “looks similar” plants to help you accurately identify an unknown plant?

### *Key*

What type of keying method is used (color, flower shape, dichotomous, family, etc.)? How easy or difficult is it for you to use? How successful do you feel using this type of key?

### ***Coverage of region***

How complete is the coverage for the region you are considering? Does the field guide contain native, naturalized, rare and/or well known wildflowers? How many wildflowers are illustrated? How many are described?

### ***Glossary***

Is there a glossary of terms used in the book? Does the glossary include useful illustrations? Are the terms helpful to you (more “lay-person-oriented” or perhaps more “botanist-person-oriented”)?

### ***Bibliography***

Does the field guide include a bibliography which might suggest other field guides or supplemental material you would find helpful?

### ***Other considerations***

What are the author’s credentials?

What do other users of the field guide have to say about it?

How reliable does the information seem to be?

Before you actually purchase a field guide, I recommend reading as many book reviews as you can to determine if the book you are considering is actually the best choice for your needs, interest and skill level.

If possible, check with your library for a copy of field guides which you can borrow and practice using. Or you may be able to borrow a field guide from someone you know. You could also connect with a local wildflower group or a Master Gardener. You might ask one of these people you have met if you can look through their collection of field guides to get a sense of the usefulness of their field guides to you.

Given all the possible combinations of aspects mentioned above, you may find that having more than one field guide becomes useful to you. Each book has its strong points and areas that are less helpful.

Many years ago I purchased one wildflower field guide. It was a frustrating choice for me because (1) it frequently did not have the flower I was looking for; (2) if it did, I did not recognize it because the photo was not representative of the flower I was looking at; and (3) the photos only showed the flower which was not enough detail for me (a heavy-duty “detail” person). Over the years, I have purchased several more wildflower field guides. They complement each other nicely.

Ultimately, you want to own a field guide with which you can succeed in your plant identification quest. The field guide should meet your needs as well as your preferred style of learning and level of detail.