

Exploring Wildflowers

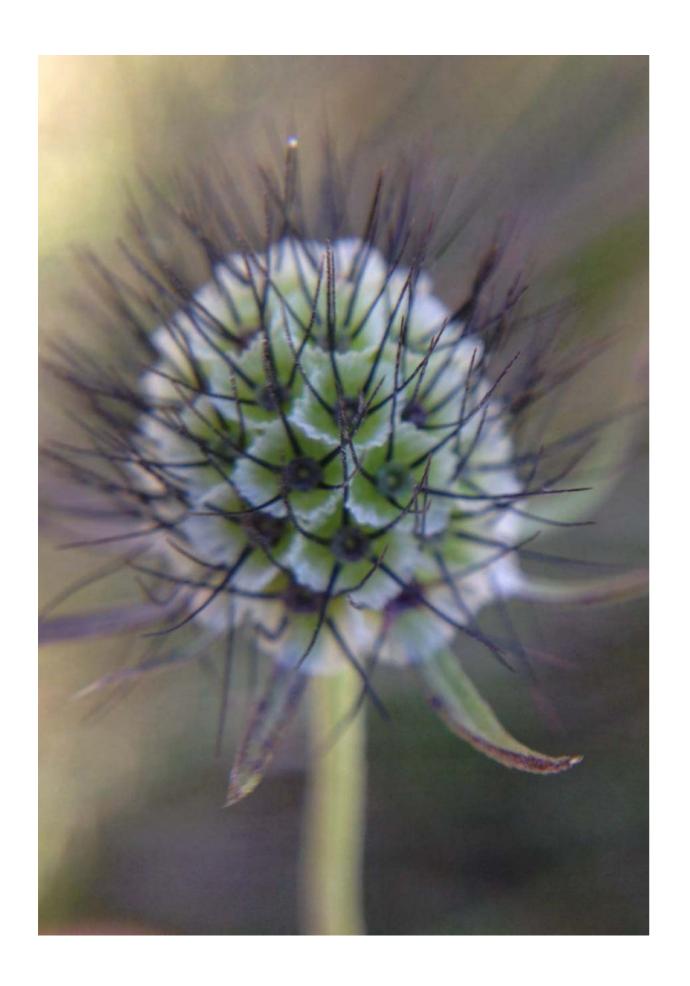












Introduction

This plant species identification training aid has been funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund as part of a three year community engagement project. A key objective of the project is an enhanced visitor experience, with new opportunities for people to learn about and enjoy this spectacular site.

Coombe Bissett

Coombe Bissett Down is a 70 hectare nature reserve located to the south west of Salisbury. The reserve encompasses rolling chalk downland, steep slopes and a dry valley. An extent of the reserve has been designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest due to a rich variety of plants and invertebrates.

In 2020 a range of events were planned to teach volunteers and local residents more about this habitat and the plants it contains, but due to Covid-19 these events could not take place. This booklet, and the accompanying online quiz, aims to familiarise and build confidence in identifying 50 of these species.

Chalk Downland

Chalk grasslands have suffered huge declines over the last century, and now largely survive as fragments scattered across the country.

They are one of the most diverse habitats found in the UK. This diversity is tied to their underlying soil conditions and management. One of the interesting factors is the link between low soil nutrients and high diversity. These conditions mean that much of the vegetation is struggling in tough growing conditions, meaning no single plant can dominate, and there is always space for minuscule plants such as Fairy Flax and Small Scabious. Single meter squares can therefore contain over 50 species, all surviving in a close matched battle for survival.

This booklet will help you identify 50 of these plants, all of which can be encountered in chalk and calcarious grassland across much of the UK.

It is always hard to work out the best way to group these species, and there is no perfect way to do it. In this booklet we have grouped the main families that are really worth knowing, and then after this have grouped flowers by colour. A full index will help you locate them, and photo credits are given at the back.



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Grasses

Many people find grass ID quite intimidating, but once you know what you're looking for these crucially important and rather spectacular groups of plants can be quite straightforward!

Firstly, it's worth bearing in mind that there is a limited suite of species you're likely to find in this sort of habitat.

Agrostis capillaris	Common Bent
Agrostis stolonifera	Creeping Bent
Anthoxanthum odoratum	Sweet Vernal Grass
Arrhenatherum elatius	False Oat-grass
Avenula pratense	Meadow Oat-grass
Avenula pubescens	Downy Oat-grass
Brachypodium sylvaticum	False Brome
Brachypodium pinnatum	Tor-grass
Briza media	Quaking-grass
Bromopsis erecta	Upright Brome
Carex caryophyllea	Spring Sedge
Carex humilis	Dwarf Sedge
Carex flacca	Glaucous Sedge
Catapodium rigidum	Fern Grass
Cynosurus cristatus	Crested Dog's-tail
Festuca ovina	Sheep's Fescue
Festuca rubra	Red Fescue
Holcus lanatus	Yorkshire-fog
Koeleria macrantha	Crested Hair-grass
Luzula campestris	Field Wood-rush
Phleum bertolonii	Smaller Cat's-tail
Poa pratensis	Smooth Meadow-grass
Trisetum flavescens	Yellow Oat-grass

Not all of these are found at Coombe Bissett, and we'll include just 12 here.



Briza media Quaking Grass

Droopy, loose pyramidal head of dancing sugarpuffs.

To identify it when not in flower, look for a relatively sturdy grass with the bottom leaves in opposite pairs coming out at 90°.





Bromopsis erectα Upright Brome

Leaves with long individual hairs (camel's eyelashes) in loose tussocks.

Flowers red-tinted when fresh, borne on thin stems so they nod in the slightest breeze.

Upright Brome can form quite dense tussocks, and this grass dominated much of the west-facing slopes of the old reserve.



Cynosurus cristatus Crested Dog's-tail

This grass is most easily recognised by its stiff upright inflorescences, which have one flat side and one raised one (the 'crest'). If you hold the stem and flick them it will wag like an excited dog's tail.







Festuca ovina Sheep's Fescue

A very fine grass, with erect spiky flowers. The leaves are typically short and often slightly grey coloured, forming small tussocks on the ground. The flower stems are typically 20 cm and have a single needle-like leaf coming out below the flowerhead. (Sheep=needle) It is also unusual in having jet-black roots.

This only grows in very high quality chalk grassland, often on thin rocky soils. It can survive extreme drought but is a poor competitor when placed with other grasses.







Festuca rubra Red Fescue

Another fine-leaved grass, but this one is larger with mid-green and slightly longer leaves. When in flower the stem can grow up to 80 cm with a bladed leaf coming out below the flower, unlike the needle of Sheep's fescue (Red=leaf)





Holcus lanatus Yorkshire-fog

A lovely medium sized, soft floppy grass. It has broad leaves, which when stroked have the unmistakable feel of velvet. The heads turn from pink to green to pale brown by late summer. If not in flower look for the unique 'Pink stripy pyjamas' at the stem base.



Luzula campestris Field Wood-rush

One of the first grasses to set flower, this has the colloquial name of Good Friday grass, when its short nodding flower-heads can be clearly seen rising above the early spring sward. It has extraordinarily hairy leaves, with small red knobs on the left tip, separating it from other types of Wood-rush.





Phleum bertolonii Smaller Cat's-tail

One of the 'microphone head' grasses. If you look at the individual florets you should see two little devil's horns, which separates this genus from the Foxtail grasses. It also has an unusual stem base, with a series of small swellings looking like a chain of beads.

This species only grows on chalk grassland. If the flower head is much larger (>6 cm it may be a grass called Timothy (*Phleum pratense*) which grows in richer agricultural soils.





Smaller Cat's-tail



Spring Sedge (right)

Sedges

These members of the broader grass family are more robust, and their leaves can be found most of the year forming rosettes of leaves on the ground. In flower they have visibly separate male and female segments, with the fruits consisting of tiny hard nutlets.

Carex flacca Glaucous Sedge

Leaves grey/blue below, green above. Fruits turning very black towards end of summer.

First female inflorescence dangly when ripe.

Carex caryophyllea Spring Sedge

Shiny bright, yellow/green leaves.
Small, orangey inflorescence, with the male spike forming a club-shape. Very early flowering (from April), as the name suggests!



Carex humilis Dwarf Sedge

This species is a real speciality and has its stronghold in Wiltshire. Unlike most other sedges it has delicate needle like leaves, forming soft but thick cushions.





Daisy Family

The Daisy Family (or Asteraceae) is one of the most highly evolved and successful groups of plants on the planet. Each 'flower' is in fact made of dozens of individual florets, divided into two types, the ray florets (often incorrectly called petals), and the disc florets which make up the central part of the flower. Each one can be separately pollinated, and then often go on to form a 'pappus'; a feathery parachute which can carry the seeds high into the wind.

Centaurea nigra Common Knapweed

A distinctive late summer plant, and a huge lure for butterflies including the Marbled White.

This knapweed has a fairly compact head, with simple slightly spear-shaped leaves at the base.

Close examination of the leaf reveals tiny 'pricklettes' along the margin, and as the leaves develop up the stem these become more pronounced side-growths, still with the needle at the ends.

Centaurea scabiosa Greater Knapweed

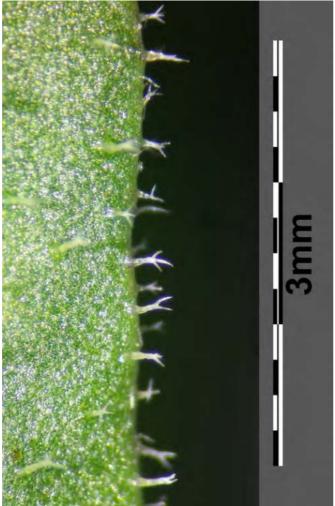
A much larger knapweed, with an extravagant extra layer of florets around the edge. The leaves are also more exuberant, deeply divided into side branches (and can be confused for Field Scabious leaves, which are much more rough to the touch)



Cirsium acaule Dwarf Thistle

If you ever sit down to admire the wonderful views and birdsong at Coombe Bissett, the chances are you'll sit on one of these. A small but fierce thistle, this sits flat on the ground, with the flower embedded in the centre to avoid being grazed. It is only found on very high conservation value chalk grassland, which might cheer you up despite having your picnic ruined!





Leontodon hispidus Rough Hawkbit

One of the dreaded 'yellow composites' this looks superficially like Dandelion from a distance, but close inspection reveals a much tougher stem and set of leaves. They are rough to the touch, and with a handlens you can see all the hairs are split at the ends.

Unlike Dandelion this is a specialist of chalk grassland.







Leucanthemum vulgare Oxeye Daisy

A delightful giant daisy, with unmistakable nodding large heads. The basal leaves are spatula shaped, becoming more divided as they get older.



Pilosella officinarum Mouse-ear Hawkweed

Another yellow composite, but this one really stands out with its sulphurous yellow coloured flowers, and leaves like little mouse's ears leaves, with white undersides and long straggly soft hairs.











Pea Family

These plants all tend to have the classic sweet pea flower arrangement, with four petal arrange into two bottom 'keel' petals, two side wings, and a large standard at the top. The leaves are often but not always highly dived, and frequently have tendrils to allow them to crawl their way up through the sward.

Hippocrepis comosα Horseshoe Vetch

Superficially similar to Bird's-foot Trefoil, but the leaflets are borne in rows along a stem rather than trifoliate. The flowers are smaller, but there are more in each head, sometimes forming a circle, and often a horseshoe shape. Later in the year strangely wiggly seedpods are produced, unlike the pointy claws of Bird's-foot trefoil.

Lathyrus pratensis Meadow Vetchling

The leaflets on vetchlings tend to be arranged into pairs. Looking like erect bunny's ears, with prominent tendrils, often wrapped around stems of neighbouring plants. The unmistakable yellow pealike flowers are arranged vertically on spikes.





Lotus corniculatus Common Bird's-foot Trefoil In this species the leaflets are arranged into clover-like three-leaved groups, although much pointier than clover. The flowers can be a deep orange when young, thus the common name 'Eggs and Bacon'.

When mature they hold their talon-like pods out in threes, looking like the foot of a chicken.



Trifolium pratense Red Clover

An easy plant to identify, this is usually an indicator of fairly good quality grassland, unlike white clover which tends to inhabitant higher nutrient soils, and is restricted to the pathways at Coombe Bissett. When not in flower check for hairs on the leaves; Red=hairy (top photo), White=Shiny (bottom photo)











Carrot Family

This large family does not have that many representatives on dry chalk grassland, but as well as the two listed below it is worth keeping an eye out for Wild Parsnip, with its yellow flowers, much later on in the year. All the members of the family have flowerheads with multiple florets, held in an umbrella like structure. As well as many edible members, the family also contains the bulk of poisonous plants in the UK.

Daucus carota Wild Carrot

Easily mistaken for Cow Parsley, the easiest way to separate this in leaf is by feeling for the bristly stem. Once in flower look out for the dense head, with decorative bracts hanging down for below, and occasionally the presence of a single purple floret in the centre, thought to be a lure to attract pollinators in.

Pimpinella saxifraga Burnet-saxifrage

This specialist of chalk grassland can be fiddly to identify, mostly as its basal leaf looks totally different to the finer stems leaves, and does a very good impression of Salad Burnet. Once in flower there is nothing else in chalk grassland which looks like a delicate form of Cow Parsley, which makes it easier to spot.





Bedstraw Family

Galium album Hedge Bedstraw

With the classic whorl of leaves this looks superficially like the more common Cleavers, but if you try to stick it to your clothing you'll see it lacks the velcro-like hooks. In mid-summer it flowers profusely, with a sweet honey like smell.





Galium verum Lady's Bedstraw

The only member of the Bedstraw family producing copious amounts of yellow flowers, this plant is confined to chalk grassland, and is readily identifiable by its whorls of needle-like leaves. Prized as bedding material in the medieval ages it was springy and sweet-smelling, and had anti-louse properties, making it the ultimate lady's bedroom accessory!

Field





Teasel Family

Knautia arvensis Field Scabious

Rough leaves and stems - the lower leaves can look rather like Knapweed, but lack the 'pricklettes' described earlier.

Scabiosa columbaria Small Scabious

The smallest members of the family, this has chameleon-like leaves, starting off as simple spear-shaped basal rosette, before becoming very divided and then turning into needle-like wisps on the flowering stem.

Succisa pratensis Devil's-bit Scabious

This member of the family has fairly consistent leaf shapes, marked by the presence of a strong white mid-rib, giving the leaves the appearance of Pak Choi. This species is the food plants of the Marsh Fritillary butterfly, with both the plant and the butterfly found on dry cold banks and set acid meadows.





Plantago lanceolata Ribwort Plantain

A common plant found in a range of habitats. The leaves are long and strongly ribbed, and although the flowers are not the most striking they are great fun for pinging at people!





Plantago mediα Hoary Plantain

Compared with the above the flowers of Hoary Plantain can be breathtaking in summer, with spikes of whitey-pink wavy flowers, which from a distance can almost be mistaken for an orchid. The leaves are much broader. This species is only found on chalk grassland.





Rumex acetosa Common Sorrel

Unmistakably a member of the Dock family when in flower with its red spikelets of flowers and seeds. The leaves (which are edible) and more fleshy and less crinkly than dock, with a cordate base.





Rumex acetosella Sheep's Sorrel

This sorrel only grows on very low nutrient soils, either in chalk or acid grasslands. The base of the leaf has much more exaggerated lobes, sometimes circling all the way round on themselves.









Sanguisorba minor Salad Burnet

A classic sight of chalk grassland, the pinnate leaves can be found almost the whole year round, and are edible, tasing somewhere between cucumber and apple.

They have very interesting flowers, starting off as green balls they soon develop into either male (long dangly bits) or female (dark red tentacles) florets. Some flowers have both types on them, while some entirely consist of one or the other.





Anacamptis pyramidalis Pyramidal Orchid

Recognisable by the intense deep pink flowers, with a narrow range of colour. The pyramid shape of the spikelet is also unique to this species.





Dactylorhiza fuchsii Common Spotted Orchid

This can be a difficult group of orchids, but in chalk grassland the most likely find is this species. In leaf look out for the deeply spotted leaves with the blotches running across the leaf, (unlike Early Purple Orchids when they run up and length of it). The flowers have a range spots and stripes on the petals, and if in doubt on the exact species this patterning and the shape of the lower petal will need to inspected and compared to the books.





Gymnαdenia conopseα Fragrant Orchid

This orchid has much taller spikes than the previous two, and on closer inspection you can see long nectar tubes coming out of the back of each flower. It is our only native orchid with a strong smell, which is delight to sniff on a hot summer's day!





Neotinea ustulata Burnt-tip Orchid

This orchid is the jewel in the crown at Coombe Bissett, as it only grows in one location on the reserve. The colour is unmistakable with the white base and deep crimson top. What is more surprising is how small they can be, with some specimens one a few centimetres tall, so they really do need some looking for!

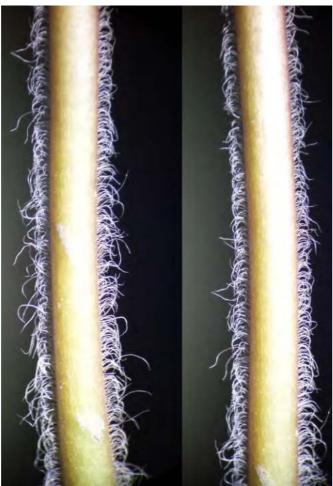




Prunella vulgaris Self-heal

A delightful small purple flower. Even when the flowers have gone over the seed heads are very showy due to the red-tinged sepals.





Veronica chamaedrys Germander Speedwell

This is our largest terrestrial speedwell, with large flowers which are equally cerise-blue over the petals.

Closer inspection of the stem reveals the hairs are arranged in two opposite rows, looking like a double mohican haircut.





Achillea millefolium Yarrow

As the latin suggest the leaves of yarrow are comprised of thousands of small sections, giving them a feather fern-like appearance. The flowerheads are confusing, as even though each individual flower is daisy like, the overall arrangement looks very like the umbel of a member of the carrot family.





Euphrasia officinalis agg. Eyebright

A truly spectacular little flower, and well worth close examination with a hand lens to admire the artwork of the petals, designed to entice pollinators towards the nectaries. This species belongs to an 'aggregate' of many many species, some of which can only be definitely identified by genetic testing, but unless you're very confident it's ok to just call them Eyebrights!



Filipendula vulgaris Dropwort

This flower is always a surprise to beginners, as it looks so like the familiar Meadowsweet which one is used to seeing in damp meadows. This close relative is confined to dry chalk grasslands, and although the flowerhead looks similar, it is overall smaller, with slightly larger individual flowers. The leaves are very different too, looking like a more chaotic Salad Burnet, but lacking the red stem and with the leaves alternating up the stem.







Linum catharticum Fairy Flax

A truly magical flower, which is only found in really well managed grasslands, due to its minute size and inability to compete in thick grasslands. Early in the season look for threadlike stems with pairs of tiny spear-shape leaves, and after the flower have gone over looked out for striped hard seed pods. In June, when in flower, it is fairly unmistakable.







Agrimonia eupatoria Agrimony

In late summer this is the plant you'll be picking out of your socks and dog's fur. The leaves are made up of toothed leaflets in opposite pairs, and from June onwards it sends up tall spikes of floppy looking yellow flowers, soon turning into densely barbed pods.





Helianthemum nummularium Common Rock-rose

A beautiful plant of chalk grassland, often sprawling over banks. The leaves can be confused with Wild Thyme when smaller, but lack the herby scent. It is worth examining the sepals, as with their dark red stripes they are striking in their own right; this pattern is carried over to the seed pods.



Primula veris Cowslip

A familiar plant of chalk banks with its drooping pale yellow heads. In leaf it can be told apart from Primrose as the leaves have a clear stem at the base, before widening out with leaf blade (in Primrose the leaf blade starts form the very base).



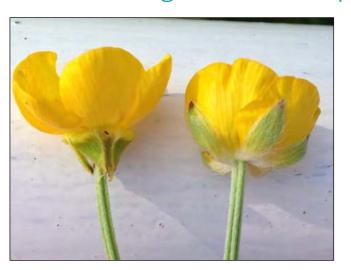






Ranunculus bulbosus Bulbous Buttercup

A common site in early summer, but also one of the most abundant members of this family found on chalk. In flower it is distinctive with the curious habit of holding its sepals on a downward angle (left photo). The leaves are more divided than Creeping Buttercup, but not as much as Meadow Buttercup, making it look like a cross between the two. If in doubt gently excavate around the base of the stem and you should find a large swollen turnip-like growth.



Campanula rotundifolia Harebell

Another beautifully delicate inhabitant of the chalk with its pale blue nodding heads. In leave it can be spotted with its lobed leaves on long stems.

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Daucus carota	Wild Carrot	Composite	Dom Price	By Wilhelm Zimmerling PAR - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ w/index.php?curid=78983791	By Stefan.lefnaer - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=86390865	
Pimpinella saxifraga	Burnet-saxifrage	Composite	By Udo Schmidt from Deutschland - Pimpinella saxifraga L.Uploaded by Amada44, CC BY-SA 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ w/index.php?curid=24356149	By Liczyrzepa - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=12229206		
Galium album	Hedge Bedstraw	Bedstraw	By H. Zell - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10188375	By Hectonichus - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=27211167	By AnRo0002 - Own work, CC0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ w/index.php?curid=40383613	
Galium verum	Lady's Bedstraw	Bedstraw	By H. Zell - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10204649	By Benjamin Zwittnig - http://www2.arnes.si/~bzwitt/flora/galium_verum.html, CC BY 2.5 si, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=41284445		
ínautia arvensis	Field Scabious	Teasel	By AnemoneProjectors (talk) - Flickr: Field Scabious (Knautia arvensis), CC BY-SA 2.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=14520265	By Ivar Leidus - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=26757095	By Wilhelm Zimmerling PAR - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ w/index.php?curid=79711818	
icabiosa columbaria	Small Scabious	Teasel	PatriciaVNes / CC BY-SA (https://creativecommons.org/ licenses/by-sa/4.0)	By Jacob Sturm - Fig. from book Deutschlands Flora in Abbildungen see http:// www.biolib.de, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ w/index.php?curid=755639		
Succisa pratensis	Devil's-bit Scabious	Teasel	By Fornax - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4114737	Dom Price	By Stefan.lefnaer - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=64307404	
Plantago lanceolata	Ribwort Plantain	Green	CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=126300	By Algirdas at the Lithuanian language Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8019955		
Plantago media	Hoary Plantain	Green	By Robert Flogaus-Faust - Own work, CC BY 4.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=84218251	CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=109209	By No machine-readable author provided. Taka assumed (based on copyright claims) No machine-readable source provided. Own work assumed (based on copyright claims)., CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=237533	
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Rumex acetosella	Sheep's Sorrel	Green	By Rasbak - Own work, CC BY- SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=282737	CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=241137		



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Anacamptis pyramidalis	Pyramidal Orchid	Orchid	By Gilles San Martin from Namur, Belgium - Anacamptis pyramidalis, CC BY-SA 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ w/index.php?curid=84849996	CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=39766		
Dactylorhiza fuchsii	Common Spotted Orchid	Orchid	Dom Price	aBitith_att	MESON THE	William St.
Gymnadenia conopsea	Fragrant Orchid	Orchid	Dom Price	Line land	THE PERSON NAMED IN	
Neotinea ustulata	Burnt Orchid	Orchid	Dom Price			
Prunella vulgaris	Self-heal	Purple	By H. Zell - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=49708367	By Wilhelm Zimmerling PAR - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ w/index.php?curid=79715227		
Veronica chamaedrys	Germander Speedwell	Purple	By Ivar Leidus - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=26560953	By Andreas Eichler, CC BY-SA 4.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=73581212	By Wilhelm Zimmerling PAR - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ w/index.php?curid=78732568	By Stefan.lefnaer - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=48511069
Achillea millefolium	Yarrow	White	By Ryan Hodnett - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=76098696	CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=49618		
Euphrasia officinalis agg.	Eyebright	White	Dom Price	By Lazaregagnidze - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=36859614		
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Linum catharticum	Fairy Flax	White	Dom Price	By Fornax - Own work, CC BY- SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=4221895	By Krzysztof Ziarnek, Kenraiz - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ w/index.php?curid=66359497	By Biodehio - Own work, CC BY- SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=40509644
Agrimonia eupatoria	Agrimony	Yellow	CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=255252	CC BY-SA 3.0, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=255258	By Donald Hobern from Copenhagen, Denmark - Agrimonia eupatoria, CC BY 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ w/index.php?curid=63745392	
Helianthemum nummularium	Common Rock-rose	Yellow	By Olybrius - Self- photographed, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/ w/index.php?curid=87616738	By François Meignant - https://www.tela-botanica.org/eflore/consultation/popup.php?module=popup-illustrations&action=fiche&referentiel=bdtfx&id=11838, CC BY-SA 2.0 fr, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=77605275	By Liliane Roubaudi - https:// www.tela-botanica.org/eflore/ consultation/popup.php? module=popup- illustrations&action=fiche&refere ntiel=bdtfx&id=72625, CC BY- SA 2.0 fr, https:// commons.wikimedia.org/w/ index.php?curid=77610860	
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