
The very first botanical field guide I ever owned was Wildflowers of North Carolina, given to me as a teenage amateur botanist. Written by William Justice and Ritchie Bell and published for the first time in 1968, this rather small and skinny (215 pages) volume has been carried into the woods by tens of thousands of fledgling plant lovers and experts alike over the years. I myself have two copies; a worn out field copy and a 35-year-old office copy which is still in great shape and which I still hope to have autographed by Bell. I now use my worn copy to teach my sons about our native wildflowers. I have noticed however, that in the past few years I have begun leaving Justice and Bell’s book at home when I wander in the woods, using instead newer guides with more species represented and with more botanical and conservation information included in the species descriptions. Thus it was with great joy, (and a big fat “At last!”) that I received the long awaited second edition of my old favorite wildflower guide for review.

The second edition of Justice and Bell’s Wildflowers of North Carolina is, in my opinion, far superior to the original for a number of reasons. First, my qualms about too few species have been addressed with the addition of one hundred new natives. Second, while I am as nostalgic as the next guy about the yellowed photos in my old copies, it was great to see so many high quality images of the species. A number of species were represented by multiple photos to aid in identification at different times of the year. Third, an interesting key of sorts has been added to the opening pages to introduce beginning botanists to the morphological characteristics used in plant identification. The key is used throughout the book with abbreviations for different flower parts, leaf shapes, etc. that the reader can use to verify if the plant they see is the plant on the page. Fourthly, cultural information has been added for those who would like to use the plant in a garden setting. Light requirements and soil moisture needs are dealt with by coded abbreviations. In addition, another symbol has been added to the description to depict whether this plant is commercially available, with a caveat added to the introduction to only buy from reputable nurseries that do not wild-collect plants. Fifthly, both the medicinal status and toxicity of a given species are represented by separate symbols. As these two characteristics often coincide (i.e. medicinal plants can often be toxic), this is an important addition to the text. Finally, and for me most importantly, text and symbols have been added to the descriptions to inform the reader about the conservation status of the plants. In our region, where habitat loss is an everyday reality, the ability to relate to the public how vulnerable a given plant is to human activity is invaluable. I am extremely pleased that the authors and editors took the time to include plant conservation as one of their descriptors. The more often these issues are brought to the attention of the public, the harder they will be to ignore.

To conclude: “Buy this book!” It is a vast improvement on a volume that was already a classic. The things such as the glossary of botanical terms and drawings depicting floral anatomy that made the original as well as it was are still there. The family groupings that helped you see morphological similarities remain. It is just a better book, for all the reasons I have mentioned and more, I am sure. It is a better field guide when we need a new crop of amateur botanists, like that teenager that still has his first tattered, stained copy that he uses to introduce his kids to the wonders of North Carolina wildflowers.

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