

Know your Nova Scotia plants

Free e-book is an authentic, comprehensive Flora of the province

by David Patriquin

In the fall of 2014, a long awaited, fully revised update of the Flora of Nova Scotia was released as an e-book by the N.S. Museum of Natural History. Authored by Marian Munro, Ruth Newell, and Nicholas Hill, it's titled "Nova Scotia Plants," but it is a Flora in the formal sense.

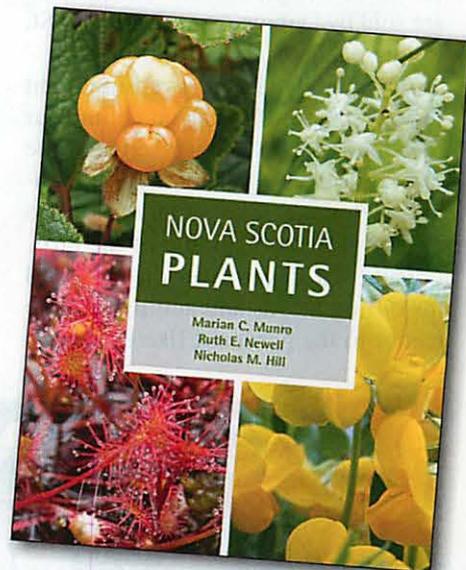
The word "flora," not capitalized, refers loosely to the plants within a region; capitalized, it refers to a published scientific document listing all species of vascular plants – horse-tails, lycopods, ferns, gymnosperms (conifers), and flowering plants – in a specific region, usually with descriptions and keys.

Species that are found exclusively in gardens or in crops are not included in a Flora, but species of exotic origin that reproduce in the wild are included.

So every plant one encounters in the wild in Nova Scotia should be in "Nova Scotia Plants." That includes approximately 2,000 species, of which about a third are exotics, mostly occurring in human disturbed habitats (e.g. as weeds in crops and on roadsides).

The e-book can be downloaded via a page on the N.S. Museum website (<https://ojs.library.dal.ca/NSM/pages/view/Plants>) as a single PDF document, or in sections.

The last release of an updated Flora was in 1988 as a two-volume paper document that I liked very much as a desk reference, but it was too large to carry in the field. Major benefits of this new electronic version are that it is free; it can be placed on mobile devices; it is up to date; and it will be more readily updated than old printed versions.



This kind of document is not designed to make identification of plants easy for non-specialists. A Flora uses



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botanical language, which is probably the most complex of any branch of biology and can take some time to master. "Hispid, holoparasitic, hypogynous, imbricate, indehiscent, indumentums, indusium" read six successive entries of the 415 in the glossary for "Nova Scotia Plants." Popular guides either avoid such terms altogether, or express them in plain English.

For nature lovers who want to identify plants without having to negotiate botanical terminology, there are good popular guides available. The Peterson series is perhaps the best known. We also have nature apps for mobile devices; the Audubon series seems to have captured the market, at least for now.

One limitation of guides and apps that cover more than just Nova Scotia is that one might mistakenly identify a specimen as a species that does not actually exist in the province. That's where "Nova Scotia Plants" will come in handy, even for non-specialists. You can cross-reference your tentative identification; if that species does not appear in "Nova Scotia Plants," you were probably wrong. If the species is listed as present in Nova Scotia but not in the part of the province or habitat where you found the specimen, your identification would be suspect. In such a case, you might check other species listed in the same section of "Nova Scotia Plants" to see if any of them match the specimen at hand. In the process, you will begin to learn some of those glossary terms!

Another limitation of popular guides and apps: they cover the more common and conspicuous species, but may not include some rare one. Generally they are also deficient in their coverage of more difficult-to-identify groups such as grasses and sedges. But in "Nova Scotia Plants," all species are included. We can hope that Nova Scotia flora apps built specifically for non-specialists will be developed in the not-too-distant future. The "Nova Scotia Plants" e-book is a first step in that direction. Follow the "Nova Scotia plant identification" link at RuralLife.ca for a comprehensive list of resources.



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