PLANTS OF OREGON: INTERACTIVE KEYS AND COLOR PHOTOS

During the NPSO annual meeting in June 2002 I purchased *Plants of Oregon*, the CD produced by Flora ID Northwest containing interactive keys for all the vascular plants known to grow in Oregon, both native and naturalized. This collection of approximately 3,750 Oregon vascular plant species does not represent a new taxonomic treatment. Rather it has been compiled from the several published floras, with which most of us are familiar, by selecting those species that occur in Oregon. The producers have updated the nomenclature as much as possible, providing synonyms for species with recent name changes and building them into the program. Until the eagerly-anticipated new flora of Oregon is published, this compact disk stands as the most up-to-date and complete flora of Oregon that exists today. This list, along with a color photograph for each species, makes *Plants of Oregon* a most useful resource quite beyond its principal function which is the species identification program.

This system is not a traditional dichotomous key. For all of us raised on using such identifying keys, expect a major learning curve as you adjust to this multiple access, interactive program, which is definitely a different approach to identifying unknown plants. With practice and a growing familiarity with the menu of characters, the identifying process becomes easier, for you learn which characters are most useful in particular cases and in what order to select them. I found it a useful exercise to start with a known plant and watch how the list of potential candidates dwindled as I selected specific attributes, and also to notice how the ever-narrowing list varied depending on the order of selecting attributes. You also have to be careful when selecting from among a range of closely spaced choices for some characters, for an inadvertent wrong choice can eliminate your species from the list of remaining choices. Once your species is dropped, it will not come back even if you enter other correct characters for that taxon.

An attribute of this keying process is that the shrinking list of potential candidates can remain quite a mix of genera, even as it gets down to a very few species, unlike a traditional key which guides you to progressively smaller sets of ever more closely related taxa until you reach the destination. This is an interesting experience and not at all a bad thing. It prompts you to think about the relations between characters and genera. When the list of remaining possibilities is manageably short, a quick look at the photographs may lead to a clear identification, or at least allow you to make further eliminations from the list. Of course a problem arises if none of the pictures looks like your specimen. When this happens a quick click on the little paintbrush icon clears all previous choices so you can start the search again!

Identification is faster if you select the family first (when you know it), for this substantially limits the possibilities. This strategy can then open the way to a nice feature of the program, the special family/genus menus, which explore in detail distinctive attributes of some large families or tribes. Experienced botanists will find these especially handy for quickly narrowing the possibilities for large families, such as Asteraceae. Novices will also find these special menus useful, for they provide guidance among the choices that need to be made. Another nice feature, especially for newcomers, is the "*A*" icon that suggests attributes from which to choose, at any step along the way, for distinguishing among remaining species in the search. Thus the program serves as an excellent learning tool for the inexperienced person, who wishes to identify plants to species and to understand the qualities that are important for distinguishing among families, genera, or individual species.

In summary, *Plants of Oregon* is a worthy addition to any botanist's arsenal of plant-identifying resources. I am glad I bought this program. I am still learning how to use it. I am still more comfortable with the familiar old ways and tend to doubt the conclusions I reach with the program – until upon checking I see that the program has given me the correct answer. I'm still working on switching my old mind into a new mindset. It can be done. Try it yourself.

-- Jim Duncan, Siskiyou Chapter,
Native Plant Society of Oregon