The Cambridge Illustrated Glossary of Botanical Terms


Reviewed by Edward C. Jensen, Professor of Forest Biology, College of Forestry, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331.

This glossary provides definitions and illustrations of over 2400 terms used to describe and classify vascular plants. The majority of terms refer to structural parts of plants visible to the naked eye or with a low power hand lens. The book is divided into two major sections: a glossary without illustrations and a set of labeled illustrations without definitions, requiring one to flip back and forth between sections for both. The illustrations are simple but effective, and all of the terms identified in the illustrations are well defined in the glossary. I found the combination to be an effective and efficient way to accomplish the authors’ goals.

Terms in the glossary are listed alphabetically, as one would expect, with most followed by a page number identifying a linked illustration (sometimes several). Illustrations are grouped functionally, rather than alphabetically, which facilitates both browsing and finding parts with which one is unfamiliar. A brief introductory section clarifies symbols, prefixes, suffixes, units of measurement, and taxonomic rank.

The book is written and illustrated by Michael Hickey and Clive King. Hickey has taught botany and botanical illustration to a variety of audiences for over 40 years. He is an award-winning illustrator (Royal Horticulture Society) and has written a book on drawing plants (among several others). King has served for over 30 years as a taxonomist and librarian of the University Botanic Garden in Cambridge. This is their third book together, in addition to several produced independently.

I found the book easy to use—it was surprisingly simple to move back and forth between major sections. Illustrations were simple but effective, and definitions were clear and as straightforward as such things can be. Perhaps the greatest asset to those less versed in botanical terminology is that the illustrations are easy to browse because of their functional grouping. This makes it relatively simple to find a term when you know what something looks like, but don’t have the foggiest idea of its name. The only weakness that I can point to is the lack of a pronunciation guide, which would be especially helpful for novice users.

Of the several glossaries that I keep on my shelf, it is most similar to Plant Identification Terminology, An Illustrated Glossary by J. G. Harris and M. W. Harris (Spring Lake Publishing, Spring Lake, UT). Both contain about 2,400 terms, and both are effectively illustrated, although Plant Identification Terminology places illustrations and definitions together. Both are easy to use. Forced to make a choice, I’d probably opt for the Cambridge version because of its larger and functionally grouped illustrations.

This book should be of interest to anyone needing to know plant terminology, from university students studying dendrology, plant anatomy, or taxonomy for the first time, to professors, scientists, or field personnel who may have learned the terms once but need a periodic refresher. I believe it might also be of interest to avid home gardeners and tree aficionados. Because of my teaching responsibilities, I’ve been a regular user of botanical glossaries for over two decades; this is among the best I’ve encountered.