
BOOK REVIEW

Flora Europaea on CD ROM. Cambridge University Press. 2001. ISBN 0 521 77811 5. £350.00. [DOI: 10.10M/S0960428602230152]

Flora Europaea is the definitive Flora for European plants, the printed version consisting of five volumes. Now, at the click of a button or two, you can go to a page from any of these volumes on your computer screen. You can look up a family, genus or species on the electronic index, you can search the text for any word (or combination of words), you can instantly look up a term in the electronic glossary, and you can identify a plant with the electronic key.

The fact that the text is all in one place and relatively quickly navigable does offer advantages. But the use of the original page-by-page format (you view a single page at a time as if you were reading a book) surprised me. Here was an opportunity to break away from the confines of the printed page and allow the user instantly to view complete specific or generic descriptions; instead these continue to run across page breaks and it is possible to print out only a single page at a time.

The index allows access to the appropriate page more quickly than would be the case in the printed version, although here (and elsewhere – for example in finding the right map) the process is more cumbersome than it needed to be. The electronic glossary is a good idea, potentially helping to make the text more comprehensible in a user-friendly fashion. Double-click on any word in the text and the glossary will quickly look it up, although several of the botanical terms that I looked up (e.g. mucronulate, locus, glabrescent) are not there.

The electronic word search is a facility that does offer an advantage over the printed publication, although given the taxonomic index there are few occasions where one is likely to need to use it. However, I was able to search for the word 'medicinal' and quickly find all the references in the book to medicinal uses of the plants. The electronic keys work well once you have got the knack of them, allowing you to view the potential outcomes at any stage of the process and to backtrack where necessary. You can rapidly progress from family-level through to species-level, or start further down the line if you know what you're looking at. Once you arrive at an identification you can then jump straight to the description in the text.

I feel that an opportunity has been missed by the continued use of the original dichotomous keys. The great thing about computer technology is that it allows multiple character entry, allowing the user to leave out missing characters (e.g. with incomplete or sterile specimens) but nevertheless to arrive at an identification, or at least at a list of possible determinations. This system has been successfully used by a number of CD-based identification systems, and is particularly effective when accompanied by images. Although adaptation of the keys and incorporation of images for a Flora of this scale would be a substantial undertaking, it would doubtless make for a more 'user-friendly' end product.

In some circumstances this electronic version offers advantages over the original. In others it does not. Whatever, it's a great deal more compact than the five printed volumes, so if you're short of space on your library shelves this could well be the answer to your problems.

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