

Simplified Key to British Grasses

This key is designed to simplify the identification of British grasses (Poaceae). While it does not include every taxon, the deliberate exclusion of certain taxa streamlines the process, making the key easier to use and, with practice, possible to memorize. The omitted taxa are included at the end of the key. In most cases they are widely recognized and restricted to specific habitats (e.g., Common Reed) or rare and localized and therefore unlikely to be casually encountered.

The key primarily identifies grasses to the genus level, with a few exceptions; some genera (such as Hairgrasses and Oats) are treated collectively, whilst a few species are identified specifically. Its structure emphasizes visual simplicity, focusing on the most obvious features of the grasses rather than precise morphological differences.

Technical terminology is kept to a minimum, and the key primarily relies on inflorescence characteristics, except for one instance where variability within the Fescues necessitates a broader approach.

Designed as a quick-reference tool, the key complements more comprehensive guides, such as the Collins Wildflower Guide (see references), which will be needed for species-level identification in most cases. With practice, the combination of this key and familiarity with the omitted species will allow for confident identification of all taxa covered in that guide.

The Key

If	Then
1 Inflorescence an obvious Panicle or Raceme with clearly visible pedicels	Go to 2
Inflorescence a spike with spikelets attached directly to stem or with very short pedicels	Go to 15
2 Spikelets in a dense cluster	Cock's-foots (<i>Dactylis</i>)
Spikelets not in a dense cluster	Go to 3
3 Spikelet elongated, ending in a point	Go to 4
Spikelet round or open	Go to 8
4 Lemmas awned or with pointed tips	Go to 5
Lemmas not awned, with rounded or flat tips	Go to 6
5 Basal leaves tightly rolled (bristle-like) and/or glumes of roughly equal length	Fescues (<i>Festuca</i>)
Leaves flat and wide, glumes always of unequal length	Bromes (<i>Bromus</i>)

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| 6 | Leaf sheaths unfused, saltmarshes
Leaf sheaths fused, wet margins | Saltmarsh Grasses (Puccinellia)
Go to 7 |
| 7 | Two (sometimes three) florets per spike
More than three florets per spike | Whorl-grass (Catabrosa aquatica)
Sweet Grasses (Glyceria) |
| 8 | Spikelets generally rounded
Spikelets "open" | Go to 9
Go to 11 |
| 9 | Pedicels arranged in whorls around the stem
Pedicels arranged singly or in pairs around the stem | Milletts (Milium)
Go to 10 |
| 10 | Small floret enclosed by glume
Large floret not enclosed by glume | Melicks (Melica)
Quaking Grasses (Briza) |
| 11 | Spikelets with very shiny silver or purplish edges
Spikelets not like this | Go to 12
Go to 13 |
| 12 | Elongated pubescent florets

Rounded, glabrous florets | Hair-grasses (Koeleria, Deschampsia, Corynephorus, Aira)
Soft-grasses (Holcus) |
| 13 | Spikelets with single fertile floret (sometimes with vestigial florets)
Spikelets with two or more florets | Bents (Agrostis)

Go to 14 |
| 14 | Lemas not awned
Lemas awned | Meadow Grasses (Poa)
Oats (Avenula, Gaudinia, Arrhenatherum, Avena, Trisetum) |
| 15 | Inflorescence a spike with alternate nodes of one or more spikelets
Inflorescence a spike with spikelets one sided or in dense cluster | Go to 16
Go to 21 |
| 16 | Spikelets having obvious spacing, with spikelets (ignoring floret awns) only partly overlapping
Densely packed cereal-like clusters of spikelets, mostly hiding stem | Go to 17
Go to 19 |
| 17 | Single glume
Two glumes | Rye-grasses (Lolium)
Go to 18 |
| 18 | Spikelets with short stalks
Spikelets sessile | False Bromes (Brachypodium)
Couches (Elymus) |

<p>19 Floret rounded, lemas awnless or with short awns Lemas with very long awns</p>	<p>Bread Wheat (<i>Triticum aestivum</i>) Go to 20</p>
<p>20 One spikelet per node Three spikelets per node</p>	<p>Rye (<i>Secale cereale</i>) Barleys (<i>Hordeum</i>)</p>
<p>21 Spike with one-sided spikelets Spike cylindrical or rounded with clustered spikelets</p>	<p>Go to 22 Go to 23</p>
<p>22 Awns very short Awns long</p>	<p>Crested Dog's-tail (<i>Cynosurus cristatus</i>) Squirrel-tail fescues (<i>Vulpia</i>)</p>
<p>23 Spike cylindrical, much longer than wide Spike rounded, no more than twice as long as wide, or reed-like</p>	<p>Go to 24 Go to 27</p>
<p>24 Globular spikelets with long bristles Spikelets without bristles</p>	<p>Bristle-grasses (<i>Setaria</i>) Go to 25</p>
<p>25 Unawned lemas enclosed by two awned, horn-like glumes Lemas awned</p>	<p>Cat's-tails (<i>Phleum</i>) Go to 26</p>
<p>26 Long stipes on glumes giving fluffy, bearded appearance to inflorescence No stipe</p>	<p>Annual Beard-grass (<i>Polypogon monspeliensis</i>) Foxtails (<i>Alopecurus</i>)</p>
<p>27 Inflorescence, white, softly hairy, like a Hare's tail Inflorescence greenish</p>	<p>Hare's-tail (<i>Lagurus ovatus</i>) Canary-grasses (<i>Phalaris</i>)</p>

Grasses not included

Bamboos *Sasa*, *Pseudosasa* – familiar very large perennials introduced to parks and gardens, with large leaves and woody stems.

Cut-grass *Leeseia oryzoides* – very rare but easily recognisable perennial, restricted to Surrey and Sussex levels.

Mat-grass *Nardus stricta* – abundant wiry, densely tufted perennial of acidic upland moors.

Rough Dog's-tail *Cynosurus echinatus* – mostly restricted to the Channel Islands and Isles of Scilly. In same genus as Crested Dog's-tail, but “at-a-glance” looks like the Squirrel-tailed Fescues so doesn't fit the above key.

Fern Grasses *Catapodium* – widespread annuals, and easily recognisable once learnt.

Blue Moor Grass *Sesleria caerulea* – abundant blue-green perennial of limestone grassland.

Hard-grass *Parapholis* – very distinctive, low growing, coastal annual.

Holy-grass *Hierochloa odorata* – an annual only found in a few scattered locations in northern England and Scotland.

Small-reeds *Calamagrostis* – tall, reed-like perennials, mostly found in wet ground.

Marram *Ammophila arenaria* – familiar perennial of coastal dunes.

Niit Grass *Gastridium ventricosum* – rare and declining annual of south and south-west.

Early Sand Grass *Mibora minima* – very rare annual, only found at a few scattered coastal localities.

Silky-bents *Apera* – Annual neophytes of lowland south and south-east England.

Water Bent *Polypogon viridis* – once learnt, an easily recognisable annual of lowlands.

Lyme-grass *Leymus arenarius* – common perennial of coastal dunes.

Heath Grass *Danthonia decumbens* – densely tufted perennial with very hairy ligule, found mostly on acidic heaths.

Pampas-grass *Cortaderia selloana* – large, familiar garden perennial.

Purple Moor-grass *Molinia caerulea* – abundant purplish perennial of moorlands.

Common Reed *Phragmites australis* – large, familiar wetland perennial.

Bermuda Grass *Cynodon dactylon* – uncommon but very distinctive mat-forming perennial.

Cord-grasses *Spartina* – distinctive perennials of coastal and estuarine habitats.

Cockspur *Echinochloa crus-galli* – large and distinctive annual arable weed.

References

Collins Wild Flower Guide 2nd Edition, Streeter et al., 2019

Grasses of the British Isles, BSBI Handbook No. 13, Cope and Gray, 2009

[Key to Groups of British Grasses | Biodiversity Projects](#)