

## INTRODUCTION TO THE VASCULAR FLORA OF THE BLUE RIDGE



May 18 – 22, 2026

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### Course description and goals:

This course welcomes students, professional biologists, and plant enthusiasts alike. Centered on the rich botanical diversity of the Highlands Plateau, it provides both an introduction and a refresher on studying vascular plant diversity.

Through a community-based lens, participants will explore the flora of the Blue Ridge during field excursions and hands-on identification exercises. Course objectives include:

- Understanding key distinguishing features among lycophytes, ferns, and seed plants.
- Learning field characteristics of common and rare species and the habitats they occupy.
- Developing confidence in using identification keys.
- Gaining a clearer understanding of the ecology of major regional plant communities and the biogeography of their species.

This immersive field experience offers a strong foundation for anyone interested in the botanical richness of the Southern Appalachians.

**Daily schedule and expectations:** Lectures and workshop activities starting @ 9:00, including field trips often with moderate hiking; lab activities include workshops on plant diversity, keying out species, including discussions on plants, group activities and occasional lectures on mountain flora, plant communities, and plant interactions. Students are expected to learn in the field and lab through these activities and various textbook and online resources.

### **Instructional material: Field guides, PDFs, Flora Apps, Web sites**

The Vascular Flora of the Southeastern United States in its most up-to-date form is brought to you by Alan S. Weakley and the Southeastern Flora Team. The Flora consists of PDFs (of the full flora area, of individual states, and subregions), a set of mobile apps called FloraQuest, and the Flora of the Southeastern United States web app. Field guides are still valuable, and the two listed below will serve you well during and after the course. I will generally follow Spira's book for descriptions of communities, context on species, and other informative sections.

**Recommended Field Guides:**

- 1) *Native trees of the Southeast* by LK Kirkman, CL Brown and DJ Leopold. 2007. Timber Press. ISBN-13-978-0-88192-828-0.
- 2) *Wildflowers and Plant Communities of the southern Appalachian Mountains & Piedmont* by TP Spira. 2011. The University of North Carolina Press. ISBN 978-0-8078-7172-0
- 3) *Wildflowers of the Atlantic Southeast* by Laura Cotterman, Damon Waitt, and Alan Weakley. 2019. Timber Press. ISBN 978-1-60469-760-5.

**PDFs/Web Sites & Apps/Phone Apps:**

- 1) *Flora of the Southeastern United States* (FSUS) by AS Weakley and the Southeastern Flora Team. webapp: <https://fsus.ncbg.unc.edu/>
- 2) *The FloraQuest Apps* are available now for both iOS and Android devices for \$19.99 at the following links: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/floraquest-carolinas-georgia/id1552447057>; <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.emountainworks.android.southeastfieldguide&pli=1>-- Note: a technical and amazing resource for studying plant diversity in the southeast.
- 3) *Name that Plant*. A storehouse of information about native and naturalized plants of the Carolinas and Georgia – compiled by JK Marlow; <http://www.namethatplant.net/> -- Note: less technical, but fully linked to FSUS keys, images, and SERNEC.
- 4) *SouthEast Regional Network of Expertise and Collections* (SERNEC): database; consortium of 233 herbaria in 14 states in the southeastern USA; provides herbarium specimen images and metadata with the goal of facilitating research, management planning and a well-informed public: <https://sernecportal.org/portal/>
- 5) *iNaturalist*. <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/inaturalist/id421397028>; <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=org.inaturalist.android>

**Required Supplies:**

- 1) One small notebook for taking field notes, preferably one that is rain proof.  
(Example: “Rite-in-the-Rain”)
- 2) A notebook for organizing course material, drawings, etc.
- 3) One hand-lens for making field observations, e.g., Bausch & Lomb 10X Hastings triplet hand lens magnifier (to be purchased before coming to HBS), or something like it.
- 4) A laptop and phone is critical for using the FSUS during exercises and management of species lists and other course materials as well for using the field apps and recording observations

**Additional Gear and Preparations:**

- 1) you will need field clothes & some gear (including sturdy hiking shoes, rain gear, water bottle, day-pack, warm clothes just in-case)
- 2) you should be prepared to take your lunch into the field

**Assessment:** Active participation is valued in our learning community, e.g., occasional plant collecting to share in the lab and team-based lab activities. Participation and quizzes in the field and lab will be used to assess performance in the class.

**Accommodations for students with disabilities:** Due to the experiential nature of the learning activities, this course is generally not recommended for students with limited mobility. For students with learning disabilities, I'm prepared to work within the limits of a short-course and accommodate as best I can. Please get in touch if you have questions.

**Tentative Schedule:**

5/18 M – Arrive, check-in @ HBS

10:00 am: Introductions; whole plants; vascular plant overview;

**(lunch at HBS)**

Trip to Sunset Rock

Plant communities: Upland forest; Low elevation rock outcrop

5/19 T – 9:00 am: Lecture & Workshop in the lab

**(lunch at HBS)**

Trip to Shortoff Mt

Plant Communities: upland/ridge hardwood forest; Low elevation rock outcrop; Mt seep

5/20 W – 9:00 am: Trip to Whitewater Falls

**(bring lunch)**

Plant Communities: Rich cove forest; hemlock bluff; rocky streamside

5/21 TH – 9:00 am: Trip to Blue Ridge Parkway: Richland Balsam, Devil's Courthouse

**(bring lunch; dinner in Brevard)**

Plant Communities: Spruce-fir forest; Northern hardwood forest; High elevation rock outcrop; Heath bald; Rock wall/hanging seep; Forest edge

5/22 F – 9:00 am: Trip to the Chattooga Basin: Dulaney Bog, Iron Bridge, Slick Rock, Rich Gap

**(bring lunch)**

Plant Communities: Mt bog; Acid cove; Rocky streamside; Low elevation rock outcrop; pine-oak heath; Rich cove