

The Press Democrat
October 12, 2024

Plant ID apps are accurate and continue to improve

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



While plants apps are helpful, they shouldn't be your only source of information, especially if you identify edible plants in the wild.

Question: Help! I need clarification about all the new plant ID apps. How do I get started?

Answer: We've all been there: excitedly planting something new, only to forget its name or details as time passes. Thankfully, we now have various tools at our fingertips — literally. But with so many options, how do you know which app to trust? And are the answers reliable?

Embracing new technology can be daunting, especially when identifying the plants in your garden. With a few simple tips, you can confidently use plant identification apps and tools to ensure your plants thrive. Knowing exactly what you're growing allows you to provide the proper care, from planting to pruning and everything in between. In addition, identification of invasive exotic plants, weeds and potentially toxic plants is useful information for every gardener.

Getting started with apps

Plant identification apps are generally quite accurate, and they're getting better constantly. However, it's important to remember that plants can look different at various stages of development, and even slight differences in cultivars and hybrids can lead to confusion. Add in the fact that human error (like a blurry photo) can influence results, and it's clear why some caution is necessary.

Here are some key points to keep in mind when using plant ID tools:

Don't rely on just one source: While these apps are helpful, they shouldn't be your only source of information, especially if you identify edible plants in the wild. Always cross-reference with other reliable sources to ensure accuracy and safety.

Include images of flowers and fruit whenever possible: Since the science of classifying plants (taxonomy) is based on shared characteristics of a plant's reproductive parts, it's important to include flowers and fruit in the images uploaded to plant ID apps.

Understand how apps work: Most plant ID apps use machine-learning algorithms to recognize species from images. The accuracy can vary depending on the quality of your image and the variety of plant species the app covers. Many apps focus on common or well-known plants, so they might not identify rare or unusual species.

Consider geographic relevance: Some apps are better suited for certain regions. For example, an app developed in Europe or the East Coast of the U.S. may not be as accurate for identifying California native plants.

So, what are your options? Here's a quick overview of some of the top tools available: (All of the apps below are free.)

Apple's Visual Lookup: Integrated into the iOS Photos app, this feature allows you to tap on a photo and get information about the objects within it, including plant species. It's user-friendly and works seamlessly within Apple's ecosystem. Take a picture and then use the photo to identify the plant. When you open the photo, look for the "i" icon at the bottom of the screen. If the Visual Lookup feature is available for that image, you'll notice a small sparkly or starlike icon on the "i." Swipe up on the photo or tap the "i" icon to reveal the Visual Lookup results.

Google Lens: Google Lens is available through the Google app, Google Photos or Google Assistant for Androids and iPhones. It's a versatile AI tool for analyzing and interpreting visual data. With the Google Lens app open, point your camera at a plant or upload an image saved in your phone, and Google Lens will provide the pertinent information. This app can be used to identify any object, not just plants.

iNaturalist: This app is a favorite among nature enthusiasts and citizen scientists. Not only can you use it to identify plants, but it can also be used to determine other living organisms, such as insects. By uploading photos, you can get plant identifications

through AI and community input. It's a great tool for learning more about plants and wildlife.

Seek by iNaturalist: A more beginner-friendly version of iNaturalist, Seek offers instant identification through a camera view. It's perfect for quick and easy plant IDs.

PlantNet: Focusing specifically on plants, PlantNet uses a vast database and AI to identify species based on photos. It's also a powerful tool for gardeners who want to contribute to scientific research.

LeafSnap: Designed primarily to identify trees, LeafSnap uses visual recognition software to identify species by their leaves. It's particularly accurate for trees in North America.

Once you've identified a plant using one of these apps, verifying the results is a good idea. Check the app's suggested plant name against trusted databases such as the USDA Plants Database (plants.usda.gov) or www.calflora.org, a nonprofit database of native and nonnative plants found throughout California. Look for consistent descriptions, images and growing conditions matching the plant.

Using multiple apps can also help confirm an identification. If you're still uncertain, observe the plant over time, noting characteristics like leaf shape, flower type and growth habit. You can submit your findings to the app's community for further verification. In addition, you're welcome to submit a photo to our Master Gardener Information Desk at mgsonoma@ucanr.edu, or bring a specimen into the UCCE Sonoma office at 133 Aviation Blvd., Ste. 109, Santa Rosa. You can find more information about our office hours on our website at sonomamg.ucanr.edu.

Final thoughts

Technology has made it easier than ever to identify and care for the plants in our gardens. So, the next time you're unsure about a plant, why not try one of these apps? Sustainable gardening practices start with having the right plant in the right place and knowing how to care for it; identifying plants correctly is a critical element in sustainability.

For more detailed information and helpful video links about the applications covered in this article from the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources Department go to <https://bit.ly/3B8QOoq>.

Contributors to this week's column were John Dennis, Clio Tarazi, Diane Judd and Joy Lanzendorfer. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County <https://sonomamg.ucanr.edu> provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to toscmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.