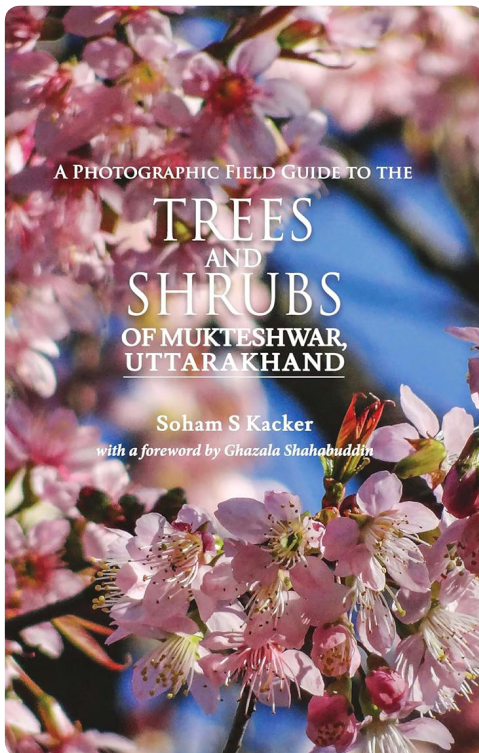


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EXPLORING HILL FLORA



A PHOTOGRAPHIC FIELD GUIDE TO THE TREES AND SHRUBS OF MUKTESHWAR, UTTARAKHAND

Author: Soham S. Kacker

Published by Abhimanyu Gahlot for Messrs
Bishen Singh Mahendra Pal Singh, 2024

Size: 215 mm x 140 mm

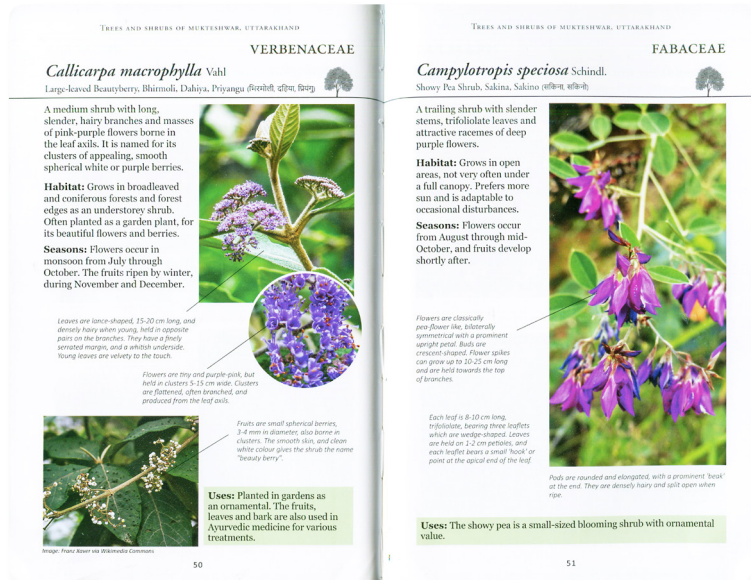
106 Pages, Paperback

ISBN: 978-93-6028-922-5

A wonderfully accessible field guide with striking images, ideal for beginners and visitors exploring Mukteshwar's flora, though it could delve deeper into the cultural connections and richness of local plant life.

In the genre of field guides focusing on Indian flora and fauna, it is the group of plants that has been experimented with a lot, in a good way. Plants, inherently, make it easier to make all the connections an organism has to its landscape. Plant-focused field guides go beyond the identification characteristics into the culture and other things that connect us to them. So, when a new field guide comes along, there is always curiosity about how the slightly complex information is presented. The Photographic Field Guide to The Trees and Shrubs of Mukteshwar, Uttarakhand by Soham S Kacker, provides a useful field guide, one of the few that have focussed on the Himalayan region recently. It is a good, user-friendly field guide that will help people engage more with the landscape of Mukteshwar and make them curious to know more. However, it leaves a more seasoned user wanting more.

The field guide is extremely user-friendly. Its strength is in its images with pointers to the key identification features of that species. The book is easy to navigate, and the indexes of local names and synonyms in addition to the scientific names offer the users various ways to reach a species page quickly. Each species has one page dedicated to it. The book has almost an equal number of trees and shrubs structured in two distinct sections. The book arranges little pieces of useful information needed to identify the trees and shrubs, and associated seasonality and uses along with pictures of the different parts of the species elegantly. The way pages are designed reminds the style of a field guide loved by many - The Trees of Delhi by Pradip Krishen - although, maybe it is because of the same comparison that one could expect more richness in this field guide.



There are some existing books on the flora of Uttarakhand such as the volumes published by the Botanical Survey of India which hardly reach a wider audience. Both a more local representation as well as a broader Himalayan perspective are lacking in the form of an easy-to-use field guide. Plants of Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary written by Rai, Singh, and Rawat in 2017 which attempts to cover a huge number of plant species and focuses more on flowering plants is another place-specific field guide from Uttarakhand that is useful although, it lacks the richness of images of identification characteristics that this field guide showcases. In that way, this is a valuable, first-of-its-kind, and easy-to-use field guide for the region. It is accessible to a variety of users. Users from other parts of the Himalayas could find this book useful to draw comparisons between trees and their uses in their region with trees in Mukteshwar through this book besides learning how to identify them. For example,

the fruits of Himalayan Horse-chestnut are used during famines in different parts of Himalayas. The section on uses in this field guide, although quite small on each page, includes a variety of uses of species, from ornamental, as attracting insects or birds, or uses as food. This section could have been expanded more as the author specializes in relationships between plants and culture.

This field guide is most useful for people who frequently visit habitats similar to Mukteshwar, and those who are beginning to explore plants around them, as it is concise and full of useful images. It would also be useful for visitors or tourists who would like to experience Mukteshwar and take a journey to know the plants in the region. It would also be useful for a gardener or the children and youth from Mukteshwar who might take up projects on trees in their area. In that light, the field guide could have also used a couple of pages on the basics of how to observe any tree, what to look out for, and how to document what is observed.

Given that the book focuses on a small geographic area, maybe finer details that connect the trees with specific places and rituals, supported by pictures or illustrations, in Mukteshwar would have been useful to bring out that feeling of Mukteshwar's ecology throughout the book. The field guide struggles to bring it out. We hardly get an idea of the people of Mukteshwar who live around these trees and their relationships. A part of a folk song about the fig tree could have been shared rather than just mentioning that there are songs, pointers to some popular locations in Mukteshwar could have been provided to search for certain species that are easily found there, such details would have helped users engage with the landscape of Mukteshwar more and made this field guide richer. There is hope and curiosity to look forward to what the author brings out in his future endeavors, this is a good start.

