

# A pictorial guide to some of the more common Speedwells of the British Isles

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It can be very tricky when you are just starting out with wild flower identification to tell one Speedwell from another as they can all look frustratingly similar. Speedwells are members of the family *Veronicaceae*, and are all in the genus *Veronica*. This is quite a large genus, but only a few of the more common species are covered by this guide.

*Speedwells are annuals or perennials, have opposite leaves and most species have blue flowers. The flowers have a flat, four-lobed corolla with a very short corolla-tube (the corolla lobes shall be referred to as petals in this guide), a four-lobed calyx and two stamens. The lowest petal is usually the smallest and the flowers show mirror symmetry ie are zygomorphic.*



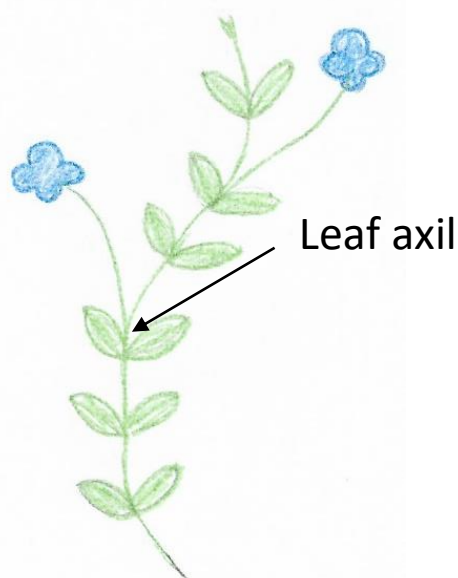
So where do you start? First of all, look at the way the flowers are arranged. See the diagrams below (not to scale), along with lists of species covered in this guide which have that particular arrangement. Are they:

- flowers **solitary** in the **leaf axils** (the angle where a leaf stalk joins the stem).
- flowers in **axillary racemes** which grow from the upper leaf axils.
- flowers in **terminal racemes** which terminate the main stem at the top of the plant.

(A **raceme** is an unbranched inflorescence in which the flowers are borne on individual stalks.)

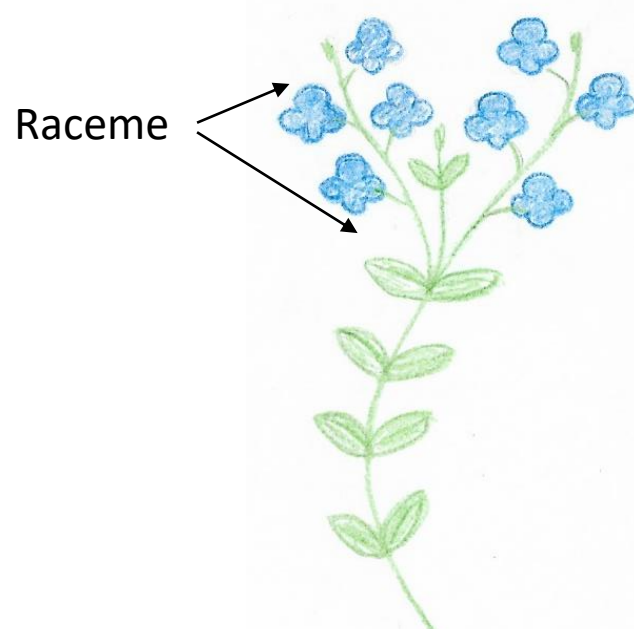
Once you have narrowed down the number of species by the way the flowers are arranged, have a look at the photographs and descriptions on the following pages. Please note that the photographs are not to scale but dimensions of the flowers are given. Not every identifying character is given for each species, so do use this guide in conjunction with a flora.

(Many thanks to [ukwildflowers.com](http://ukwildflowers.com) for allowing the use of two photographs of the flowers of Ivy-leaved Speedwell on third page.)



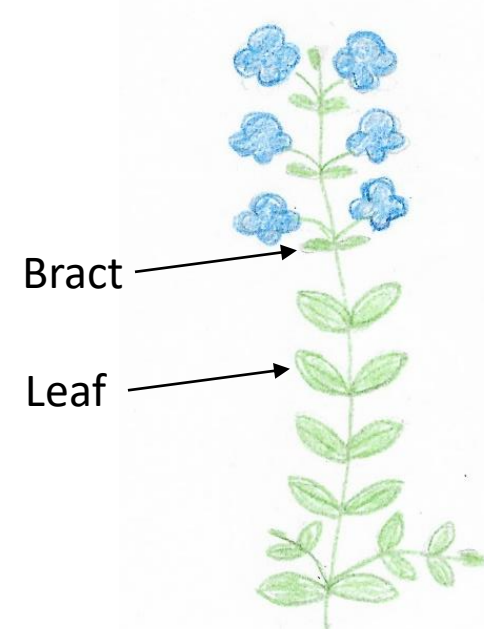
## Flowers solitary in leaf axils

Common Field-speedwell  
Grey Field-speedwell  
Green Field-speedwell  
Slender Speedwell  
Ivy-leaved Speedwell



## Flowers in axillary racemes

Germander Speedwell  
Wood Speedwell  
Heath Speedwell  
Brooklime



## Flowers in terminal racemes

Thyme-leaved Speedwell  
Wall Speedwell



## FLOWERS SOLITARY IN LEAF AXILS

### Common Field-speedwell, Grey Field-speedwell and Green Field-speedwell

Out of the species which have solitary flowers in the leaf axils, the ones most likely to cause confusion are Common Field-speedwell (*Veronica persica*), Grey Field-speedwell (*V. polita*) and Green Field-speedwell (*V. agrestis*). Common Field-speedwell is much more common than either Grey Field-speedwell or Green Field-speedwell, and if you don't see the latter two very often it can result in a bit of head scratching to distinguish them from Common Field-speedwell. However, once you have seen them a couple of times and know what to look for, it is relatively straightforward to tell them all apart. One of the most important things to look at is the shape and hair characteristics of the fruits, so a 10x hand lens or macro lens on your camera are helpful.

#### Common Field-speedwell (*Veronica persica*) annual, introduced



**Common Field-speedwell** is very widespread and its bright blue flowers can be seen all year round in fields, gardens and on waste ground. The lowest petal is sometimes a little paler in colour than the others. The fruits have divergent, spreading lobes which can have both glandular and non-glandular hairs. The leaves are a dull, light green and have 5-7 teeth per side.

#### Grey Field-speedwell (*Veronica polita*) annual, introduced



**Grey Field-speedwell** has smaller flowers than those of Common Field Speedwell, and they are a darker, bright blue. The fruits have erect pea-shaped lobes with erect glandular hairs and short non-glandular hairs. The leaves are a dull, dark green and have 4 teeth per side. Flowers all year round in places such as arable fields and cultivated land.

#### Green Field-speedwell (*Veronica agrestis*) annual, ancient introduction



**Green Field-speedwell** also has smaller flowers than those of Common Field-speedwell, and they are whitish to pale blue or pale lilac. Like Grey Field-speedwell the fruits have erect pea-shaped lobes, but they have erect glandular hairs only. The leaves are mid-green and have 3-4 teeth per side. Flowers all year round in places such as arable fields and cultivated land.



**Slender Speedwell** (*Veronica filiformis*) perennial, introduced



Flower width 8-15 mm



Rounded to kidney shaped leaves

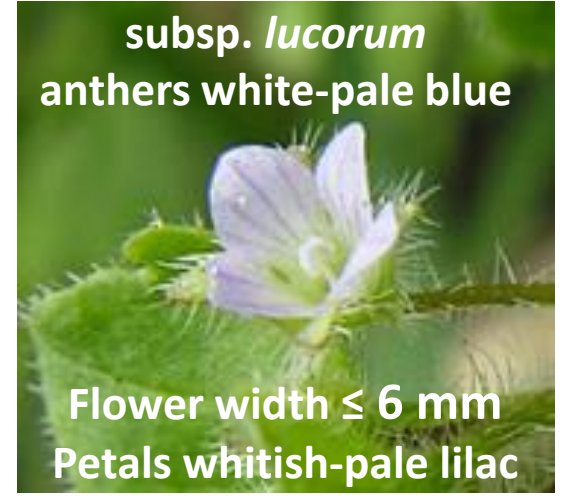
**Slender Speedwell** is recognisable by its characteristic rounded to kidney-shaped leaves, and the clear, bright blue flowers on long stalks. The lower petal has a more elongated shape than that of Common Field Speedwell. It is mat-forming and spreads by creeping stems which root at the nodes. This is the reason it is found in regularly mown grass such as lawns, churchyards, playing fields and other grassy places, as it can spread by grass clippings.

**Ivy-leaved Speedwell** (*Veronica hederifolia*) annual, ancient introduction

photo credit ukwildflowers.com



subsp. *hederifolia*  
anthers blue  
Flower width  $\geq$  6mm  
Petals whitish-blue



subsp. *lucorum*  
anthers white-pale blue  
Flower width  $\leq$  6 mm  
Petals whitish-pale lilac

**Ivy-leaved Speedwell** has very small flowers which are only about 6 mm across. The ivy-shaped leaves, which look slightly thick and fleshy, are light or yellow-green with 3-5 lobes. It is found in fields, gardens, waste ground, up against walls and in pavement cracks. There are two subspecies (subsp.) which are not always possible to tell apart (see photos for names and differences), with subsp. *lucorum* more likely to be found in shady and less disturbed places like woodland rides and hedgebanks.

## FLOWERS IN AXILLARY RACEMES IN UPPER LEAF AXILS

**Germander Speedwell**

(*Veronica chamaedrys*) perennial, native



Flower width 8-12 mm



Unstalked leaves

**Germander Speedwell** (left) has bright sky-blue flowers with a white eye in the centre, in long-stalked racemes which bear 10-20 flowers. Typically the stems have two opposite lines of white hairs, but sometimes they may be hairy all round. The leaves are a dull green, bluntly-toothed and hairy. They are either **stalkless** or else very short-stalked. Grows on hedgebanks, verges, wood borders and in grassy places.

**Wood Speedwell** (below) has very pretty pale lilac flowers. It is quite similar to Germander, but the key differences are that the stems are hairy all the way round, the leaves are all **stalked**, and the racemes have fewer flowers, only 2-6. The leaves are also a much lighter, fresher green colour. Whereas Germander can be found in open woodland as well as out in open grassland, Wood Speedwell is generally only found in the shade of deciduous woodland.

**Wood Speedwell** (*V. montana*) perennial, native



Flower width 8-10 mm



Light green stalked leaves





**Heath Speedwell (*Veronica officinalis*)** perennial, native



**Heath Speedwell** has delicate lilac flowers and distinctive oval, shallowly-toothed leaves. The stems are generally prostrate and creeping, and can sometimes form mats. The flowers are on long-stalked, many-flowered, upright racemes. It is found in open woodland, grassland and grassy heath. On heaths it is often found in association with Tormentil and Heath Bedstraw. It often grows on ant-hills.

**Brooklime (*Veronica beccabunga*)** perennial, native



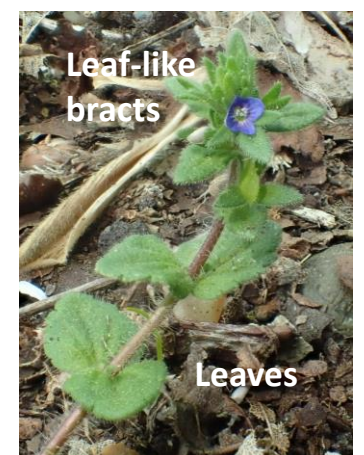
**Brooklime** has bright blue flowers borne on many-flowered racemes. The whole plant is hairless and both the stems and leaves are fleshy. The leaves are short-stalked and shallowly-toothed. It is found in short vegetation in a wide range of wet habitats, such as streams, ditches, marshes, pond edges and river banks.

## FLOWERS IN TERMINAL RACEMES

**Wall Speedwell (*Veronica arvensis*)** annual, native



**Wall Speedwell** is unmistakable, with its tiny, more or less stalkless, deep blue flowers that only open fully in bright sunlight. What look like leaves under the flowers are actually bracts, and these are a different shape to the oval-triangular leaves found lower down the stems. It grows in a range of dry habitats including arable fields, paths, tracksides and walls.



**Thyme-leaved Speedwell (*Veronica serpyllifolia*)** perennial, native



**Thyme-leaved Speedwell** has distinctive white or pale blue flowers with darker blue veining. The leaves are untoothed, oval and are often shiny. Like Wall Speedwell it has leaf-like bracts underneath the flowers. It is found in a variety of moist, grassy places like lawns, but also likes the compacted soil at the edge of paths and woodland rides. The common plant is *V. serpyllifolia* subsp. *serpyllifolia*. *V. serpyllifolia* subsp. *humifusa* is found on montane rock ledges in the Scottish Highlands, N England and N and S Wales, and has larger, brighter blue flowers. The website [ukwildflowers.com](http://ukwildflowers.com) shows photos of both subsp.