



July Horticulture Feature: What's in a Name?

Have you ever looked at a plant name and wondered who in the world put those letters together like that? You may say that scientific names are impossible to pronounce because there are sometimes things you recognize mixed with parts that don't fit together in normal speech. Usually those long, strange words seem all Greek. Well, that's almost a perfect description because sometimes Greek word roots are used. More often parts of Latin words or expressions are used which is why people often refer to the scientific name as the "Latin name". Only parts of the name are Latin descriptive words combined with other words, prefixes, or suffixes. Let's look at plant names for other patterns and hope to make scientific names more comfortable to use.

The easiest pattern in scientific names is that there are two words used that compose each scientific name. Actually, the entire scientific name has 7 parts beginning with whether the thing you are naming is plant, animal or fungus and working down to the family and then the final two categories that together form the scientific name. This is why we sometimes talk about families of plants that are similar because they are groups of relatives. The scientific name is composed of the two words with the first word being the genus and the second the species sometimes known as specific epithet. Of the two words only one of the words is capitalized. The two words are written with the genus always in capital letters and the species in lower case like *Caesalpinia grenadillo*. The complete name is in squiggly lettering called italics. The scientific name should always be in italics. This rule is ignored by all but the most dedicated plants men.

Common names are usually local names or simplified descriptive terms and lead to confusion among gardeners sooner or later. Many times I've heard talk about a plant for several minutes by people with passion in their eyes only to realize that they are speaking of different plants with the same common name like ice plant or firebush. Using a scientific name eliminates all confusion.

Also common for plant names is seeing 'ii' or 'iana' after what looks like someone's last name such as *smithii* or *jonesiana*. The 'ii' is a way of saying the plant is named after that person who discovered the plant or paid for the expedition that discovered that plant. The 'iana' means the plant is named in honor of that person. Then, you might recognize 'ensis' such as *domingensis* or *texensis* meaning the plant is from that geographical place (Dominica or Texas in this example).

The chart below gives plant names and then translates to English. Some are easy like *dentata* sounds like dental and means toothed, and *bicolor* means two-colored, and *elegans* means elegant. Longer names are often just two parts put together like *platyphylla* flat leaf from *platy*, or flat (like plates or a duckbill platypus) and *phylla* (leaf). Look through the chart and see how many names you've recognized in the plants that you've grown. When you understand the mechanics of scientific names and how they are created then they aren't so difficult. Speaking to other gardeners using scientific names sometimes sounds pretentious. Nobody aint got time for pretentious, right? Right! Speaking properly should be practiced to make it easier because nobody is born talking about inermid petioles or ephemeral flowering herbs of deciduous forests. Gardening is a practice where we try something and if doesn't work then we try again and again until we've mastered the technique and make our plants look happy. Scientific names of plants are simply an attempt to make talking about the plants a happier conversation to better describe a particular plant.