

Echinacea purpurea
Ocimum basilicum
Rudbeckia fulgida
Phlox paniculata
Callicarpa americana
Zamioculcas zamiifolia
Aloe vera
Crassula ovata
Tagetes erecta
Ceris canadensis
Chlorophytum comosum
Zinnia elegans
Vernoniastrum virginianum
SALVIA SPLENDENS
Chelone glabra
Salvia officinalis
petunia x hybrida
PRIMULA VULGARIS
Metasequoia glyptotroboides
Impatiens x hawkeri
Liatris spicata
Hydrangea macrophylla
Acer rubrum
Hemerocallis sp.
THYMUS CITRIODORUS
Schizachyrium scoparium
pinus Strobus
Achillea millefolium
Gomphrena globosa
Parrotia persica

PLANT GEEK SERIES

LEARN YOUR LATIN

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Welcome to part three of four in this Plant Geek series, focusing on some niche horticultural topics that I think are fascinating. I hope you do to! This newsletter we're talking about the importance of Latin nomenclature. Our final installment will cover fasciation and reversion. Buckle up. We're about to get really geeky!

Let me get on my soapbox for a few minutes and explain why learning your Latin names is important, especially if you are a plant enthusiast. Except for yet to be discovered organisms, all living things have been assigned a two-part Latin name. This naming system is called binomial nomenclature (literally meaning "two names") and was created hundreds of years ago by the naturalist Carl Linnaeus. The beauty of binomial nomenclature is that it is unequivocally unambiguous. No two organisms share the same Latin name.

Latin names also help us understand relationships between organisms. The first part of the binomial is the genus. All organisms within the same genus share a common ancestor. For example, all members of the genus *Salvia* are related to each other, as are all members of *Hosta*, *Hemerocallis* (daylily), or *Petunia*. Members of the same genus also share many common characteristics such as flower structure, leaf shape, or even scent or flavor. There are two additional advantages of Latin names. First, they are spelled and pronounced phonetically (although, try to wrap your tongue around *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*). Second, they often (but not always) describe the plant they refer to. For example, *rubra* = red, *alba* = white, *maritima* = from the sea-side, *orientalis* = from East Asia, *prostrata* = prostrate/downward facing, etc. Another useful Latin term is “*officinalis*”, which almost always means that plant was at one point of pharmacological or culinary interest. Perhaps the final advantage of Latin names is that they make you sound super cool!

Clearly, Latin names are amazing and give us a lot of information about plants. But why do I pooh-pooh the use of common names? Well, common names vary regionally, change generationally, and they are highly ambiguous. Let's break this down to better understand the issue.

Regional Variance: Let's compare U.S. and U.K. terms for certain plants. I remember watching Jamie Oliver cooking shows growing up and being very confused! What the heck is a courgette (Photo 1) and where do I buy one? An aubergine? Rocket? Later, I learned that Jamie was just referring to zucchini, eggplant, and arugula, respectively. Obviously, it would be silly to put Latin names in a recipe (“okay folks, now let's thinly slice our *Solanum melongena*”), but it illustrates my point. Plants are called different names all over the world.



Photo 1. Courgette or Zucchini?



Photo 2

Generational Variance: This is a less common issue, but there are sometimes generational differences in plant names. The best example I can think of is *Tradescantia zebrina* (Photo 2) being called Wandering Jew. My generation, and all generations before me learned this plant as Wandering Jew. However, this name is based on antisemitic folk lore and is no longer deemed acceptable. The kids these days (I am now old enough to say this) have started calling this plant Wandering Dude. Inch Plant and Variegated Spiderwort are also used, but sticking to the Latin name prevents all possibility of a snafu.



Photo 4

Ambiguity: There are many plants that share the exact same common name. For example, *Epipremnum aureum* (Photo 3), *Pilea peperomioides* (Photo 4), *Pachira aquatica*, and *Crassula ovata* (Photo 5) are all called Money Plant. Additionally, there are many plants with four, five, or even more common names. Which one do you pick? You might use option 1, while your neighbor uses option 4. You could be talking about the same plant and not even realize it! I would compare this to making a grocery shopping list and just writing “cheese.” Well, what type of cheese? Gouda? Cheddar? Sharp or mild cheddar? Shredded or block? Regular or low-fat? I take my cheese seriously, so ambiguous names just leave too much to chance!



Photo 4

I hope I've convinced you why Latin names are the way to go. Intimidated? Take an inventory of your garden and start learning just one Latin name each week. Before long, you'll be spouting off Latin just like Linnaeus himself!



Photo 5