

## Latin Names

Latin names? Do we really need those Latin names? Us gardeners have been growing plants for thousands of years without worrying about Latin names. Yes we have, and sometimes putting up with the same name for two different plants, Geranium for instance. So perhaps those Latin names do have a place. And we have been using some Latin names anyway, Iris and Aster for examples.

At school in England I had to take Latin for 5 years. A formidable language taught by our formidable headmistress, Miss Jump. Out of her hearing we went around muttering “Latin is a language dead as dead can be. First it killed the Romans, now it’s killing me”. Be that as it may, the Roman’s language remained in use in western Europe by the few who could read and write as a way to communicate with each other when the common languages were too different. So in 1753, when a Swedish man called Carl Linne (Latin: Linnaeus) published a book called “Species Plantarum” in which he gave detailed descriptions of several hundred plants using a two-word name for each of them, he used Latin. Most of his contemporaries accepted his system. Eventually. Plant names had been heading in this direction for some time anyway.

For the next 100 or so years everybody did their own thing, naming plants using this binomial system but each doing it in his own way with his own rules. Naturally, some plants got several names, one from each person who studied it. This wasn’t any better than the original problem of having the same plant with a different name in different languages. Finally in 1867, the various taxonomists (the people who were naming plants) got together and started developing an agreed-to set of rules. Of course, scientists are like everyone else. They can be exceedingly picky, stubborn, argumentative, nasty, vicious, hold grudges, and so on. So from then until about 1900 we had what can best be described as “Religious Wars” over how to define a species, how a word should be spelled, how the rules of Latin grammar could best be applied to words not of Latin origin, which name had priority, etc. etc. When you look back on this kind of thing, you wonder how well-educated, supposedly intelligent people can act so dumb and stupid over such little details. And I must admit that I have done my share of it occasionally, and I tell you, it can be fun. Especially if you win.

Since then, the plant naming rules have been updated several times. The latest is called the Shenzhen Code (CODE). It reads like a legal tome which I suppose it is. If you want to read it the link is <https://www.iapt-taxon.org/nomen/main.php>. Good luck. Your brain will beg for mercy. A few years ago the U.S. Justice Department took it on over the naming of a new orchid and lost.

For us gardeners, the family arrangement is as far as we need to go into plant systematics, the study of how plants are related to each other in the present, and how

they have arrived here from the past. The family arrangement is simple and familiar to us – the grass family, the sunflower family, the mint family, etc. Within each family is the Linnaean idea of Genus and Species. Genus represents a group of plants that are similar enough together and different enough from other plants, and the species represents the differences within the group. This double name system has stood the test of time surprisingly well but it can make you feel like a snob if you use two latinized names when talking to your neighbour over the garden wall. A single word is much better for those kinds of conversations.

The whole structure depends on comparing similarities with differences. Any two plants have similarities and differences. When the differences overwhelm the similarities you have two separate plants. If the differences are minor, you have two versions of the same plant. The difficulty lies in deciding when the differences are sufficient to overwhelm the similarities. Originally these similarities and differences were identified by their physical appearance and structure, all being visible by eye or sometimes with the help of perhaps a 10x magnifier. It still works, and you can use it (with a fair amount of practice) to identify a plant.

When you can compare some parts of the genetic code on the DNA strands of two plants, and the samples are identical, but the relationship derived from the appearance of the plants has identified them as in separate genera (Latin plural of genus), then the CODE says you have to change the genus name of one of them to the other. Similar work has found unanticipated differences in some of the larger genera which has resulted in them splitting into two or more pieces with new names. This revolution in plant science has happened in the last 40 years, and is the cause of the flood of renaming. For the advancement of knowledge it is valuable, but for the average gardener it is a nuisance. I expect more.

Then there is the situation often encountered of subspecies, varieties, cultivars, forms, ecotypes: I am not sure I have listed all of them. Whether they exist or not depends on the opinions of experienced knowledgeable professional and amateur individuals, based on their concept of the similarities/differences in the plants in front of them. This is exactly the same procedure as is used to separate species and families. A matter of judgment.

There is nothing to be judged with hybrids. The CODE rules are clear and simple. For hybrids between two (or more) species, an x is placed between the names. For example *Iris x germanica*, the common bearded irises are hybrids. For hybrids between genera, the x goes in front of a combined name of some sort. For example: x *Chitalpa* for the cross between *Chilopsis linearis*, the Desert Willow and *Catalpa speciosa* the Northern Catalpa. If some particular plant is favoured, a name may be added, for

instance 'Morning Cloud' for our Chitalpa hybrid, and then propagated by cuttings. You won't see the x at most nurseries.

Which brings me to patented plants. To propagate them you need the patent owner's permission, which you will probably not get. Of course if you have a few extra ones in your garden, it is unlikely (but not impossible) that you will have the RCMP on your doorstep tomorrow morning. But if you take your propagules to your local garden club sale the risk to you **and the club** rises exponentially.

I came across a bit on the internet about patented strawberries that seemed to suggest you are in trouble if they send out runners that root themselves.

I envision a scene. My patented strawberries have marched themselves into my neighbour's yard and the stolon connections have decayed. I see a black car approaching. "It wasn't me officer. I didn't do it. They did it themselves".

But seriously, do not offer rooted cuttings of patented plants for sale or even as a gift.

Time to go gardening.