

BACK TO BASICS

BOTANICAL TERMINOLOGY

by Sandy Perry

People who work with plants often feel they are at a disadvantage. The language of plants seems unnecessarily complicated and certainly unpronounceable. Why bother with *Ampelopsis brevipedunculata* when Porcelain vine will do?

The tongue twisting long names were originally intended to make life easier for the plant worker, not more difficult.

Plant classification began in earnest in the 1700's when Latin binomials—genus and species names—were given to all plants known at the time. Latin was used because it was the language of higher learning. Latin was no longer in common use at the time, therefore it didn't change. It was also "universal". All of Europe used the same scientific language so scientists from different countries could readily communicate in Latin even if their national languages were different. All students studied Latin and Greek so the language of plant classification evolved into a very precise system.

Many botanical terms and plant names are descriptive and pieced together from the Latin or Greek equivalent terms. For example, monocotyledon means one seed leaf; dicotyledon means two seed leaves. Albaflora means white flowers.

The disadvantage of this system today is that Latin is no longer a school requirement, indeed, seldom even offered as an option. The knowledge base for translating Latin terms has shrunk among the general population. The tidy system for describing plant features at a glance has been reduced to rote memorization of seemingly archaic words.

The advantages of the Latin binomial system, however, still far outweigh the disadvantages. The system remains one of the best inventions of man. Plant names are consistent. *Acer rubrum* in North Dakota is also easily recognized as *Acer rubrum* in China. Contrast that with the term tulip tree. Two neighbors on the same street can discuss tulip tree with one person meaning *Magnolia* and the other meaning *Liriodendron*.

Scientific names can tell you about plant relationships. If you know the Latin name of Oregon grape holly (*Mahonia aquifolium*), you know it is not a true holly (*Ilex*) at all. A little detective work will show that it is in the same family with barberry.

There has been an explosion of new and unusual plant varieties in the nursery industry. Without a scientific name attached it would be impossible to visually place the plant in the proper genus thus clueing us to cultural needs and pest problems.

The plant classification system keeps order among the hundreds of thousands of plants in the world. It is effective, simple and endlessly expandable.

Botanical names and terms are not a nightmare, only a crossword puzzle. Reference books can make sense out of the strangest names. Many books also help with pronunciation.

Use scientific plant names as much as possible. Practice saying them until they are as familiar to you as the common names. Scientific plant names provide a key that unlocks a world of knowledge.

2881 W. Barnes Rd.
Mason, MI 48854