

THE NAMES OF PLANTS

THIRD EDITION

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Formerly

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The nature of the problem

A rose: by any name?

Man's highly developed constructive curiosity and his capacity for communication are two of the attributes distinguishing him from all other animals. Man alone has sought to understand the whole living world and things beyond his own environment and to pass his knowledge on to others. Consequently, when he discovers or invents something new he also creates a new word, or words, in order to be able to communicate his discovery or invention to others. There are no rules to govern the manner in which such new words are formed other than those of their acceptance and acceptability. This is equally true of the common, or vulgar or vernacular names of plants. Such names present few problems until communication becomes multilingual and the number of plants named becomes excessive. For example, the diuretic dandelion is easily accommodated in European languages. As the lion's tooth, it becomes Lowenzahn, dent de lion, dente di leone. As piss-abad it becomes Pissenlit, piscacane, and piscialetto. When further study reveals that there are more than a thousand different kinds of dandelion throughout Europe, the formulation of common names for these is both difficult and unacceptable.

Common plant names present language at its richest and most imaginative (welcome home husband however drunk you be, for the houseleek or *Sempervivum*; shepherd's weather-glass, for scarlet pimpernel or *Anagallis*; meet her i'th'entry kiss her i'th'buttery, or leap up and kiss me, for *Viola tricolor*; touch me not, for the balsam *Impatiens noli-tangere*; mind your own business, or mother of thousands, for *Soleirolia soleirolii*; blood drop emlets, for *Mimulus luteus*). Local variations in common names are numerous and this is perhaps a reflection of the importance of plants in general conversation, in

the kitchen and in herbalism throughout the country in bygone days. An often quoted example of the multiplicity of vernacular names is that of *Caltha palustris*, for which, in addition to marsh marigold, kingcup and May blobs, there are 90 other local British names (one being dandelion), as well as over 140 German and 60 French vernacular names.

Common plant names have many sources. Some came from antiquity by word of mouth as part of language itself, and the passage of time and changing circumstances have obscured their meanings. Fanciful ideas of a plant's association with animals, ailments and festivities, and observations of plant structures, perfumes, colours, habitats and seasonality have all contributed to their naming. So too have their names in other languages. English plant names have come from Arabic, Persian, Greek, Latin, ancient British, Anglo-Saxon, Norman, Low German, Swedish and Danish. Such names were introduced together with the spices, grains, fruit plants and others which merchants and warring nations introduced to new areas. Foreign names often remained little altered but some were transliterated in such a way as to lose any meaning which they may have had originally.

The element of fanciful association in vernacular plant names often drew upon comparisons with parts of the body and with bodily functions (priest's pintle for *Arum maculatum*, open arse for *Mespilus germanicus* and arse smart for *Polygonum hydropiper*). Some of these persist but no longer strike us as 'vulgar' because they are 'respectably' modified or the associations themselves are no longer familiar to us (*Arum maculatum* is still known as cuckoo pint (cuckoo pintle) and as wake robin). Such was the sensitivity to indelicate names that Britten and Holland, in their *Dictionary of English Plant Names* (1886), wrote 'We have also purposely excluded a few names which though graphic in their construction and meaning, interesting in their antiquity, and even yet in use in certain counties, are scarcely suited for publication in a work intended for general

readers'. They nevertheless included the examples above. The cleaning up of such names was a feature of the Victorian period, during which our common plant names were formalized and reduced in numbers. Some of the resulting names are prissy (bloody cranesbill, for *Geranium sanguineum*, becomes blood-red cranesbill), some are uninspired (naked ladies or meadow saffron, for *Colchicum autumnale*, becomes autumn crocus) and most are not very informative.

This last point is not of any real importance because names do not need to have a meaning or be interpretable. Primarily, names are mere ciphers which are easier to use than lengthy descriptions and yet, when accepted, they can become quite as meaningful. Within limits, it is possible to use one name for a number of different things but, if the limits are exceeded, this may cause great confusion. There are many common plant names which refer to several plants but cause no problem so long as they are used only within their local areas or when they are used to convey only a general idea of the plant's identity. For example, *Wahlenbergia saxicola* in New Zealand, *Phacelia whitlavia* in southern California, USA, *Clitoria ternatea* in West Africa, *Campanula rotundifolia* in Scotland and *Endymion non-scriptus* (formerly *Scilla non-scripta* and now *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*) in England are all commonly called bluebells. In each area, local people will understand others who speak of bluebells but in all the areas except Scotland the song 'The Bluebells of Scotland', heard perhaps on the radio, will conjure up a wrong impression. At least ten different plants are given the common name of cuckoo-flower in England, signifying only that they flower in spring at a time when the cuckoo is first heard.

The problem of plant names and of plant naming is that common names need not be formed according to any rule and can change as language, or the user of language, dictates. If our awareness extended only to some thousands of 'kinds' of plants we could manage by giving them numbers but, as our awareness extends, more 'kinds' are recognized and for most purposes we find a need

to organize our thoughts about them by giving them names and by forming them into named groups. Then we have to agree with others about the names and the groups, otherwise communication becomes hampered by ambiguity. A completely coded numerical system could be devised but would have little use to the non-specialist, without access to the details of encoding.

Formalized names provide a partial solution to the two opposed problems presented by vernacular names: multiple naming of a single plant and multiple application of a single name. The predominantly two-word structure of such formal names has been adopted in recent historic times in all biological nomenclature, especially in the branch which, thanks to Isidorus Hispalensis (560–636), Archbishop of Seville, whose ‘Etymologies’ was a vast encyclopaedia of ancient learning and was studied for 900 years, we now call botany. Of necessity, botanical names have been formulated from former common names but this does not mean that in the translation of botanical names we may expect to find meaningful names in common language. Botanical names, however, do represent a stable system of nomenclature which is usable by people of all nationalities and has relevancy to a system of classification.

Since man became wise, he has domesticated both plants and animals and, for at least the past 300 years, has bred and selected an ever growing number of ‘breeds’, ‘lines’ or ‘races’ of these. He has also given them names. In this, man has accelerated the processes which, we think, are the processes of natural evolution and has created a different level of artificially sustained, domesticated organisms. The names given by the breeders of the plants of the garden and the crops of agriculture and arboriculture present the same problems as those of vernacular and botanical names. Since the second edition of this book was published, genetic manipulation of the properties of plants has proceeded apace. Not only has the innate genetic material of plants been re-ordered, but alien genetic material, from other organisms, even from other kingdoms, has been introduced to give bizarre results. The products are unnatural and

have not faced selection in nature. Indeed, some may present problems should they interbreed with natural populations in the future. There is still a divide between the international bodies concerned with botanical and cultivated plant names and the commercial interests that are protected by legislation for trademarking new genetic and transgenic products.