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Understanding Latin Plant Names

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GARDEN NOTES

UNDERSTANDING LATIN PLANT NAMES

By Dennis Hinkamp

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General-03

Knowing the scientific name of a plant is no guarantee it will grow any better. If that were the case, having a green thumb could be replaced with classes in Latin. Some people even find it pretentious when a nurseryman or gardener uses “Latin,” calling a Japanese Maple, “*Acer palmatum*.”

According to Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist, plant nomenclature was developed by a Swedish naturalist named Carl Linnaeus, in the mid-1700s. He grouped plants according to structural similarities such as flowers, leaves and fruit. Linnaeus found a natural order of plants, and listed them accordingly.

The binomial (two name) system of nomenclature he developed provides plants with two Latin names which are the “genus” and “species,” Goodspeed explains. The genus is the larger grouping, such as maple trees, whose genus is *Acer*. All maple trees fall in this genus, but are further divided into species within the genus. When writing the genus and species, the genus is always capitalized, and the species is left in lower case.

He says two examples of species within the genus *Acer*, are *palmatum* and *platanoides*. *Acer palmatum* is commonly known as the Japanese maple and *Acer platanoides* is the Norway maple.

In the binomial Latin, the genus is usually a noun, while the species is an adjective that describes the noun, or genus, Goodspeed says. For instance, the word ‘*palmatum*’ describes a leaf which is shaped like a hand. Thus, *Acer palmatum* is a maple “with a leaf shaped like a hand.” The word ‘*platanoides*’ means, “resembling the plane tree.” Thus, *Acer platanoides* is a maple that resembles the plane tree.

“Sometimes there's even more confusion when a third name is added on the binomial, he says. “This is the case of a subspecies or variety that is found in nature. An example is the ‘*dissectum*’ variety of Japanese maple. The scientific name is *Acer palmatum dissectum*. The word ‘*dissectum*’ here, is describing or explaining that the leaf is finely dissected. If the subspecies or variety is found naturally, then it is left in lowercase as the third name.”

He says sometimes we play with plant characteristics, developing and proliferating a new type, or “cultivar” of a plant within the species. The word cultivar is derived by combining

cultivated and variety. This variety of a species is cultivated and marketed because of some desirable characteristic.

“Cultivars are also added as a third name to the binomial name,” Goodspeed says. “‘Emerald Queen’ Norway maple is an example. The scientific name is *Acer platanoides* ‘Emerald Queen’. The cultivar name is capitalized and set off in single quotes. This name often describes a certain characteristic of the plant. It may also contain the name of the developer, location where it was found or hybridized, or given a catch name to grab attention to itself.”

Not everyone needs to become proficient in Latin to be a great gardener, he says, but the Latin names can add to your knowledge of the plant world. They depict a specific plant characteristic—how it grows, its size or shape, or even the smell it emits. The scientific name tells something more about the plant.

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