

What's in a (plant) name?

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Published January 14, 2017
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Have you ever wondered why plant people have the need to speak in Latin? Or do you even care?!?

Granted some people take it to the extreme and only talk in Latin but the fact of the matter is that it's very important to use Latin names for plants.

Following is a great example that I borrow from my colleague Jim Chatfield, who is quite good at teaching binomial nomenclature (more on that later).

Let's say you walk into a garden center and ask the salesperson for a red maple. She takes you over to an 'October Glory' red maple. You say, that's not what I am looking for.

She then takes you to a 'Crimson King' Norway maple and of course, that's not what you are looking for.

Finally she takes you to a Japanese maple and you are happy because that's the tree you want.

While all three have something to do with being a red tree, they are all different species of trees.

The first one is a cultivar of a red maple or *Acer rubrum*. The second is a cultivar of a Norway maple or *Acer platanoides*. The third one is a species of a Japanese maple that has red leaves.

In the plant world, we try to use the Latin name (also known as the scientific name) when it comes to talking about specific plants.

Carolus Linnaeus created the binomial nomenclature system to be used worldwide so that we all would be speaking the same language when it came to identifying plants.

In binomial nomenclature, there are two words used to name a plant. The first is the genus, the second is called the specific epithet and together the two make up the species.

For instance, *Acer* is the genus for maples. A red maple is *Acer rubrum*, a silver maple is *Acer saccharinum*, and a sugar maple is *Acer saccharum*.

Latin names are always written the same with the genus capitalized and the specific epithet lower case. They are listed in italics though some sources will underline them.

Then we have to go and mix things up a little more by adding cultivar names. Notice in the examples above that I had single quotes around 'October Glory' or 'Crimson King'?

These are cultivars or cultivated varieties of the species. In other words, they were discovered to have characteristics that were similar to the species but maybe were special.

They are propagated and sold by the cultivar name. Cultivar stands for cultivated variety. For instance, Norway maples have green leaves but 'Crimson King' was a discovery that had red foliage during the summer.

When green industry professionals are talking about plants, especially if they are ordering specific plants, they will use the Latin names.

Most gardeners don't worry about Latin names for plants and in the scheme of things, that's ok. However, there may be a time when you really want to impress at a dinner party and you roll *Liquidambar styraciflua* off your tongue.

That's a sweetgum by the way but doesn't it sound lovely!