LEARNING TO PRONOUNCE THOSE BOTANICAL NAMES
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Have you ever been enjoying a friend's garden and seen a beautiful plant not familiar to you? You would love to get one, so you ask the name of the plant, and she answers, "Oh, I don't know, it just comes up every year." How frustrating! Could that clueless gardener be you? Maybe you bought the plant, looked at the tag, saw a confusing unpronounceable name, and just tossed the tag.

What in the world do the names Achillea, Agastache, and Asclepias even mean, and how do you pronounce them? Why, you ask, would you even care?

Well, in different parts of the country, and around the world, the same plant may be referred to by several different common names. For example, in our area, Lycoris squamigera is commonly referred to as a Naked Lady. We've been known to have some fun with that name, as in "I have quite a few naked ladies in my garden this summer." Or, "In honor of your new garden, I thought I'd send over some naked ladies." In other areas the same plant may be referred to as Surprise Lilies, Resurrection Lilies, and Hurricane Lilies. This can become very confusing if you are seriously trying to communicate information about a certain plant.

Botanists, horticulturalists, and gardeners need a common ground on which to discuss their plants. A Swedish botanist named Carl von Linne addressed this problem in 1753 when he introduced his binomial nomenclature system which is still used today. It is not English or even Latin. Most names are actually made-up words, sometimes based on Latin, or sometimes Greek which has been "Latinized". Mr. von Linne even latinized his own name and is more commonly recognized today as Carolus Linnaeus.

The words could indicate a particular characteristic about the plant, the name of the person who first grew it, the place it was discovered, or none of the above. The point is, don't expect to recognize the words.

In a binomial nomenclature system, two words are used to describe each plant. The first word is called the genus, and names the plant. It is always capitalized. The second word refers to the species and is usually some kind of a description. It is never capitalized. Usually, along with the two words, you will usually see a third which is written in single quotes. It tells you the variety or cultivar of the plant.

Let's look at the plant, Agastache foeniculum 'Golden Jubilee'. Agastache (pronounced uh-GAS-tuh-kee) comes from the Greek for "much" and "grain stalks". Foeniculum comes from Latin, and means "hay". 'Golden Jubilee' is the variety, and tells you that the foliage of this plants will be a cheerful yellow. The common names used for this plant are anise hyssop, licorice mint, and wonder honey plant.
Years ago, the only names I knew for plants came from books which tended to use the botanical names only, but never bothered to tell me how to pronounce them. Consequently, I could recognize the names of quite a few plants, but hesitated to pronounce any of them. That made it difficult for me to talk about my plants, or even remember them for that matter!

One of my more humorous bloopers was the day I shared with my neighbor that I had just bought some "cotton eaters". I soon realized that I had missed an S in the word, so I corrected myself to "cotton easters". Later, a knowledgeable person, looking at my plants, mentioned my koh-toh-née-AST-ers, (cotoneasters), I had no idea what she was talking about!

Since then, I have worked at trying to learn the correct pronunciation of some of these words. It isn't easy. I notice that even the experts tend to vary the way they say the names. But, I have solved my problem!

Lo and behold, I have finally lived long enough to enter the wonderful world of Google! Now when I encounter an unfamiliar botanical name, I simply Google something like, Pronounce Asclepias. Sometimes it comes up written out like a dictionary entry, and sometimes a voice actually says the word! My favorite site is overplanted.com. He supplies an alphabetized list of botanical pronunciations which is very easy to navigate. I like to say the name out loud a few times, then, whenever I work around that plant, I call it by name. Using this method, I have learned the name for quite a few plants, and am no longer too embarrassed to try to say the name out loud.

Now, because I know you just can't stand the suspense, Asclepias, pronounced az Kleep ee az, is commonly called milkweed, the only known host plant for the Monarch butterfly, and Achillea, pronounced ack-ih-LEE ah, is commonly called yarrow.

So keep those plant tags together for later consultation. Won't that friend be surprised when she asks the name of a plant, and you just rattle it right off! Just remember, Google is your friend!

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