

News Release: February 8, 2016  
WSU Ferry County Extension  
350 E. Delaware Ave. #9  
Republic, WA 99166  
509.775.5225, X1116, [jordant@wsu.edu](mailto:jordant@wsu.edu)

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### What's in a Name?

If you get embarrassed when you forget names, or feel bad when someone forgets yours, you can see that names are important. Names matter in the garden too. Many plants have nicknames, or common names which we use most of the time. Nicknames can describe a person or plant well. "Kiss Me Over the Garden Gate" is the common name for a flower tall enough to bend down and brush your cheek as you enter your front gate. "Love in a Puff" has a puffy seedpod and a black seed with a white heart shaped mark on it. The name "Heart's Ease" tells us that the plant, a violet, is good for the heart.

But if you look for someone in the phonebook or online, you don't look up "Bud" or "Mac", you use the person's full name. There are too many Macs out there for a search engine to compute. The same applies when we search out a plant. "Pigweed," "goatweed," and "knotweed" are all names used for several plants. Adding to the confusion, many plants have more than one common name. So although I use and enjoy the common names of plants, when I need to accurately identify a certain plant, I use the botanical name. In fact, in nursery or seed catalogs, I mistrust those that don't list a botanical name along with the common name. I want to know that they know what they're selling.

Shakespeare tells us that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but if you call it by any other name, how will you find it to smell it again? The gardener who enters the nursery and asks for *Rosa gallica* 'Versicolor' isn't just showing off, but knows that *Rosa gallica* is a sweet smelling old world rose that might have grown below Juliet's balcony.

You don't need to rush out and learn Latin, but a little basic knowledge will help you identify, choose and even care for your plants.

The plant kingdom is categorized into a hierarchy of taxa:

- phylum or division
- class
- order
- family
- genus
- species

Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist, used these taxa in the mid 1700's to develop the Latin binomial (bi, meaning two, and nomial, meaning name) system, the same system we use today. For simplicity's sake, Linnaeus only included genus and species names. Scientific plant classification and naming are now regulated by the International Code of Nomenclature.

Even though they aren't included in the binomial plant name, family names can teach us a lot, too. I remember how amazed I was when I learned that apples and pears were in the rose family, 'Rosaceae.'

The genus name signifies a grouping with similar features and traits. There may be several species within a genus. The species name signifies a narrower grouping within which the individual plants are similar enough to interbreed naturally. Differences within the species may earn a plant a subspecies name as well.

The first name, *Rosa*, in the name *Rosa gallica* ‘Versicolor’ for instance, is the genus name for rose. The second name, ‘*gallica*,’ is the species name and indicates that the rose’s origin is gallic, or of Gaul, in southern Europe. It might help to think of how a phone book lists a name: Smith, John= *Rosa gallica*. The genus name is equivalent with the last name although it is listed first.

The genus is capitalized, the species is not, but both are italicized. In this example, a third name, a cultivar name, follows the species; ‘Versicolor’, referring to the broken stripes of color, in this case, pink, red and white, of the blossoms. Cultivar names are capitalized, are not italicized, and are in single quotation marks. The cultivar (or cultivated variety) name indicates human intervention. It’s been in cultivation long enough for someone to have selected or hybridized for certain traits. Cultivars are less likely to reproduce true to type than varieties.

A variety is a plant within a species with unique characteristics that occurs in nature. Variety names are often preceded by the abbreviation var. and are lowercase and italicized like this: *Rosa gallica* var. *officinalis*. *Officinalis* denotes the fact that this rose was used in medicine. Its common name is the apothecary’s rose.

A hybrid is created by crossbreeding two genetically compatible plants, whether within a species, between two separate species, or even between genera. In any case, the hybrid name will be indicated by a lowercase x between the genus and the species, i.e. *Rosa x alba*.

Latin has passed many of its words along into modern English, which helps us guess what botanical names mean. When you learn the meanings of the names, you learn more about the plant and what its needs are. For instance, you’ll plant the one named *aromaticus* near the path and the *foetidus* in the far background if at all. If *montanus* appears in the name, you’ll know to provide mountain-like conditions. Here is a sampling of meanings to start with:

- *pendulus*: hanging
- *aromaticus*: fragrant
- *foetidus*: stinking
- *repens*: creeping
- *montanus*: native to mountain regions
- *spicatus*: bearing flowers on spikes
- *vulgaris*: common

Botanical names can be changed so that just when you think you know what to call something, you may find out that it isn’t right anymore; but nothing’s perfect. Enjoy the learning as well as the knowing, and don’t forget to stop and smell the *Rosa gallica*.

Sources:

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“What’s in a Botanical Name?” by Sheri Hunter, Master Gardener  
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