

## The Importance of Being Botanical

By Hattie Braun



Bellflower: The common name bellflower can refer to dozens of different blue flowered plants. This bluebell bellflower is the native *Campanula rotundifolia*.

Woods' rose: Like the common name suggests, woods' rose (or *Rosa woodsii*) is a plant that is a rose and grows in the woods. It is native to the western United State and Canada.

Photo credit: Hattie Braun

When my daughter was in kindergarten, there were three 'Sarahs' in her class. Since there were only twenty-five students in the class, you can imagine how a common name like Sarah could cause some confusion. Common names can also create chaos in the plant world. Use the name sage and you could be referring to any one of over a hundred different kinds of sage. For the Sarahs, add the last name and you avoid much of the confusion. To distinguish plants, we have botanical names.

Botanical names, also called scientific names, refer to one and only one plant species. This name is recognized worldwide and is based on an international naming system. A plant's botanical name consists of two parts called a binomial. The first name represents the genus, and the second name is the specific epithet. Put these two names together and you know the precise species of plant. Usually, the botanical name is italicized. Any words after the binomial refer to a subset of the species or the taxonomic author.

However, many people would rather use common names because botanical names are hard to remember and even harder to pronounce. Botanical names are actually Latinized versions of words derived from Greek and Latin. However, since Latin isn't a spoken language, wouldn't it just be easier to use the common names?

Anyone who has worked at a nursery knows the value of botanical names. I spent several summers in nursery sales and I frequently had requests for bellflowers. As this is the common name for dozens of plants, the customer and I would play twenty questions while I tried to figure out which bellflower they really wanted. If they asked for *Campanula rotundifolia*, I would immediately know that they were interested in our diminutive native bellflower, the one with little round leaves and nodding, blue, bell-shaped flowers. Other common names for this circumboreal species include harebell, bluebell of Scotland, bluebell bellflower, meadowbell, round-leaved bellflower, or just plain bluebell.

A common name can be used for several different plants in the same genus. Many common names are localized and meaningful only for a certain region. Toadflax in North Carolina refers to the little, blue-flowered native better known as *Linaria canadensis*. In Arizona, mention toadflax and you will get the attention of the US

Forest Service, the folks at the Arboretum, and Cooperative Extension because it is the common name for *Linaria dalmatica*, a noxious weed.

The botanical name of a plant will provide you with much information about plant relationships and it can give you clues to plant characteristics. Take the species *Penstemon pinifolius*, for example. The *Penstemon* part tells us that this plant is a member of the large penstemon genus (about 275 species) of perennial plants that is endemic to North America. While penstemons have varying cultural requirements, as a group, they are characterized by beautiful, tube-shaped flowers that are frequently pollinated by bees, moths, butterflies, and hummingbirds.

As a penstemon, we also know that this plant belongs to the Figwort or Snapdragon family, Scrophulariaceae, a group of plants characterized by showy flowers that includes the commonly named veronicas, snapdragons, and foxgloves. The specific epithet *pinifolius* not only indicates the species, but it also perfectly describes the needle-like foliage (pini=pine-like and folius=foliage.) That's a lot of information from just two little words.

Common names may give you clues to plant characteristics, but they can just as easily lead you astray. An evening primrose isn't a primrose, a flowering maple isn't a maple, and an obedient plant is hardly obedient. A cabbage palm is neither a cabbage nor a palm; it is a lily. And a yellow flag is an iris, but a snake's head iris is not.

Pronunciation scares many of us away from even attempting the use of Latin names. Consider the tongue twister *Helianthemum nummularium* or sunrose. Follow my lead and try to pronounce a new name as best you can by breaking the word into one syllable at a time and saying it as you would in English. *Helianthemum nummularium* easily breaks down into hee-lee-AN the-mum num-ew-LAH re-um, a mouthful in any language.

My advice is to use those botanical names and if you can't remember the pronunciation of a plant name, try it anyway. I like to say both common and botanical names when I talk about plants. I am not being smug; I am letting you know exactly which plant I am referring to. And by repeating the names, I am reinforcing my knowledge of the plant name. It takes some practice, but you too can become a master of botanical names.

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