

In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



Monday, May 16, 2011

The Name Game

The names of living things have always been a source of both interest and amusement for me. Coming from a solid background in molecular biology, I'm used to strict nomenclature. Tongue-twisting scientific names of microscopic creatures are casually spoken by those who study them.

The reason for this is that there *are* no other names for the various microorganisms. Genus and species matter greatly. Perhaps within laboratories working with the same organism there'll be an abbreviation. But in general, the given scientific name is always applied. Being precise removes possibilities of errors and misunderstandings. That is very critical in the scientific world. Lay people rarely ever have to acquaint themselves with the complicated names of such bugs.

Going up the taxonomic ladder, we find common names cropping up. One does not refer to ordinary fish like bass as Osteichthyes or call ladybugs Coccinellidae. Would one know a *Dasyus*? That's the only species of armadillo native to the U.S. See what I mean? Common names exist to make it easier for the population at large.

The gardening world is a bit different. Maybe quirky is a better word. It contains highly qualified horticulturists as well as regular folk, all of whom love and know plants intimately. Gardening is an equal opportunity endeavor. The scientific names exist in tandem with the common names for plants. The ranunculus is also known as crowfoot, spearwort, buttercup and such. These non-scientific names arise from either some physical feature of the plant or what they were thought to do. Think foxgloves, trumpet vine, monkshood, heart's ease, lungwort. The list is endless.

Effort made learning the scientific names is time well spent

For the most part, the common name is derived from the genus of the plant. Peony from *Paeonia*, tulip from *Tulipa*, etc. Recognizing a plant from the Latin name can be quite straightforward. It is, however, important to make some effort to familiarizing yourself with the scientific botanical names. As mentioned earlier, it avoids mistakes in purchasing, explaining and understanding. It is especially useful when discussing plants with gardeners who speak a different language. The scientific nomenclature

stays true all across the globe and therefore unifies all botanical documentation. What an ingenious concept.

Whilst traveling, I'm prone to paying a fair amount of attention to the flora. So it is very handy to know the universal plant names. I've demonstrated this on a number of occasions to my daughter so she appreciates the value of learning the difficult names. For example, it helps to know *Syringa* is the more accurate name for lilac.

But it really hit home on a recent trip to France when we needed to find a bottle of witch hazel to use as an astringent. She was very impressed to hear me ask the pharmacist for "tonique astringent d'hamamelis" and receive exactly what we wanted. I'm sure you can appreciate the utter pleasure I got in seeming pretty cool for exactly five minutes to a teenager.

I do sometimes find it rather tedious to talk on home ground to folk who insist on only using the Latin names. Does it matter so very much? Admittedly, I'm blown away by those who can recall the exact name of every single plant. I just don't want that sort of pressure on my less than perfect memory. Impressive they may be, but sticklers for such accuracy can be a tad tiresome. As clear as it makes the subject on hand, the charm and beauty of the botanical specimen is somewhat lost. For general conversation, which do you prefer: *Cercis canadensis* or Eastern redbud? *Myosotis* or forget-me-not? Japanese Painted Fern or *Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum*?

When I hear "foxglove," I envision pretty spires of elongated bells in shades of white, pink and yellow cheering up a cottage garden. But say "Digitalis" and I'm transported instead to the cardiac Intensive Care Unit.

I know a few individuals who frown upon the use of colloquial names, but frankly I prefer to speak a blended lexicon. It feels right. However, on the rare occasion of being confronted with a "name snob," I try to rise quite heroically to the occasion. It's like being bilingual.