

# Botanical Latin *Clive Lane*

Getting to grips and making sense of plant taxonomy can be a daunting prospect for many gardeners. Taxonomy (or the naming system) originally devised by Carl Linnaeus in 1737, is based on 18th century Latin, with some Greek words and botanical terms thrown in for good measure. The names, often long and intimidating, have a string of identifiers which are unique and easily understood throughout the world, no matter what the language. By using the genus and species - the two part name or binomial - which is at the heart of the system, gardening life can actually be simplified. Nurserymen, botanists and plant professionals use this system to prevent confusion that frequently arises when using common names.

Common names are like nicknames, a corruption of an 'eke name' - 'eke' being the medieval word for 'also'. But common names can be very misleading. Pineapples for example have no connection whatsoever with either pines or apples. And there will be little point searching rose catalogues for the Rose of Sharon or the Christmas rose. Then there are some species which have as many as a dozen different common names, which not only can change from town to town, county to county but from country to country. These common names are usually derived from physical characteristics, medical associations or culinary uses. Botanical names refer to one, and only one, plant.

The first word of the two-part name is called the 'genus' and identifies which family the plant hails from. It is usually written in italics with the first letter in upper-case, e.g. *Lathyrus*. The second word is called the 'species', also written in italics but in lower-case e.g. *Lathyrus odoratus*. This identifies the species name of the plant, which typically describes something about the characteristics/appearance such as colour, shape, leaf form, or fragrance etc. This may also refer to the person who bred the plant. The 'genus' name for sweet peas is *Lathyrus* (Greek for 'pea'). The sweet pea is wonderfully scented, thus the second word for it is 'odoratus'. So the botanical 'plant name' for sweet peas is *Lathyrus odoratus*.

The story however does not end with genus and species. A hybrid is a deliberate cross (x) between two or more species. One reward of producing or discovering a plant is the right to choose the species name.

*Helleborus x ericsmithii* for example is a hellebore hybrid bred by Eric Smith using *Helleborus niger* (the Corsican hellebore) and the tender *Helleborus lividus*. A plant found in the wild which has undergone a small ‘naturally occurring’ change (e.g. may grow taller or shorter than the type) is designated a variety, as in *Aquilegia flabellata* var. *pumila*.

However, if the change is more significant, but not enough to justify the naming of a new species, taxonomists may make the plant a sub-species with its own Latinized and italicized name, like *Lavandula stoechas* ssp *pendunculata*. Cultivars are the result of minor changes in a plant under cultivation (instead of in the wild) meaning ‘cultivated variety’. The cultivar name is given in single quotation marks, e.g. *Lavandula angustifolia* ‘Imperial Gem’ or *Helleborus niger* ‘Potters Wheel’.

The general reluctance by gardeners to use ‘Latinized’ words because of the fear of Latin is understandable, but some of the most commonly used terms can tell so much about a plant without even seeing a picture. The following quick guide to these terms demonstrates their usefulness. There is also great anxiety caused by attempts to pronounce botanical Latin, but there are books which help with pronunciation - and who minds if *superbum* is sometimes pronounced ‘super bum’!

***acaulis*** - stemless

***incana*** - grey-haired

***alba*** - white

***japonica*** - from Japan

***alpinus*** - alpine

***laevis*** - white-flowered

***amabile, amabilis*** - beautiful

***lanata*** - woolly

***alta*** - tall

***longifolia*** - long-leaved

***angustifolia*** - narrow-leaved

***lutea, luteus*** - yellow

***aquifolia*** - sharp-leaved

***macrophylla*** - large-leaved

***arborescens*** - tree-like

***maculata*** - spotted

***arenaria*** - of sandy places

***majus*** - larger

***atropurpurea*** - dark purple-red

***maxima*** - largest

***aurantiaca*** - orange

***microphylla*** - small-leaved

***aurea, aureum*** - gold

***minor, minus*** - smaller

***autumnalis*** - of autumn

***mollis*** - soft

***azurea*** - sky blue

***montanta*** - from the mountains

***barbata*** - barbed or bearded

***moschata*** - musk-scented

***blanda*** - pleasant

***multiflora*** - many-flowered

***borealis*** - northern

***nana*** - dwarf

***caerulea*** - deep blue

***nigra*** - black

***campanulata*** - bell-shaped

***canadensis*** - from Canada/the New World

*candida* - white  
*cardinalis* - red  
*nivalis* - growing near snow, white  
*centifolia* - many leaved  
*nitida, nitidum* - shining  
*chinensis* - from China  
*nutans* - nodding  
*cinerea* - light grey  
*odoratus* - wonderful scent  
*citrina* - yellow  
*officinalis* - medicinal  
*citriodorus* - lemon-scented  
*orientalis* - eastern  
*coccinea* - scarlet  
*palmatum* - shaped like a hand  
*communis* - common  
*palustris* - from marshes  
*compacta* - compact  
*parvifolia* - small-leaved  
*conica* - cone-shaped  
*patens* - spreading, open-formed  
*contorta* - twisted  
*pendula* - weeping, hanging  
*cordata* - heart-shaped  
*perennis, perenne* - perennial  
*crispa* - waved, curled  
*pinnata* - feather-

shaped  
*cristata* - crested  
*procumbens* - prostrate, trailing  
*divaricata* - spreading  
*pumila* - small, dwarf  
*dulce* - sweet  
*punctata* - spotted  
*elata* - tall  
*quinquefolia* - with five leaflets  
*elegans* - elegant, slender  
*regalis* - stately, regal  
*erecta* - upright  
*reptans, repens* - creeping  
*excelsa* - tall  
*rotundifolia* - round-leaved  
*eximia* - distinguished  
*rosea* - rose-coloured  
*flava, flavum* - yellow  
*rubra, rubrum* - red  
*flore pleno* - with double flowers  
*rugosa* - wrinkled  
*floribunda* - flowering freely  
*sanguinea* - red  
*foetida* - strong-smelling 'pong'  
*scandens* - climbing  
*fragrans* - fragrant  
*semperflorens* - everblooming  
*fragrantissima* - very fragrant

*sempervirens* - evergreen  
*fruticosa* - shrublike  
*speciosa* - showy  
*glaucua* - grey-white  
*spectabilis* - spectacular  
*gracilis* - graceful  
*spinousus* - spiny  
*granda* - large, showy  
*spinosisissimus* - spiniest  
*grandiflora* - large-flowered  
*superbum* - superb  
*griseum* - grey  
*tenua* - thin  
*helix* - twisting  
*tomentosa* - hairy  
*hortensis* - of the garden  
*umbellata* - flowers in umbels  
*humilis* - low-growing  
*uliginosa* - of marshy places  
*hybridus* - hybrid  
*variegata* - variegated  
*villosa, villosum* - soft hair  
*viscaria* - with sticky stems  
*vulgaris* - common

