

DECODING BOTANICAL LATIN



BASIC BOTANICAL LATIN confounds beginning gardeners. The worst part: worries about proper pronunciation. I only wish that someone had told me 20 years earlier that any pronunciation was fine—and light-years better than imprecise common names. Botanical Latin, it turns out, isn't a real language at all—it's not the tongue of ancient Rome—but a system of nomenclature (or naming) invented by Carl von Linne, also known as Linnaeus, in 1753.

How do you pronounce the words of a language that doesn't belong to any one nation or people, exactly? Any way you like. What's important is that you learn the words and let them help you to find the plant you really want. As a bonus, certain botanical Latin words used to name various plants often also reveal that plant's characteristics. This is particularly true among the species names, or "specific epithets," the second word in each two-part (or binomial) botanical name, which modifies the first word, the genus name.

What follows is a sampling, in each case expressed in the -us ending (-a and -um are also used when the gender of the subject being modified is appropriate):

COLOR

Yellow may be expressed with *flavus* (a pale version), *luteus* or *lutea*, as in the charming *Ophrys lutea*, top photo, and *citrinus* (lemon-colored).

Red is *rubus*; rosy-pink is *roseus*.

Purple is simple: just say *purpureus*. If it's very dark, it might be *atropurpureus*.

White is *albus*; black is *nigrum*.

Silver is expressed as *argenteus*; gold is *aureus*.

As for good old green, when it's noted it might be *viridis* (or *sempervirens* in the case of evergreen).

There are various words for blue, including *azureus* (a sky-blue color) and *caeruleus* (somewhat darker).

Variegated leaves or flowers are sometimes labeled *variegatus*, but might also be called *pictus* (which means painted, and is used to indicate bright coloration of other kinds, too).

GROWTH HABIT

If a plant is graceful or slender, it might be designated *gracilis*. If it is globe-shaped, *globosus* might be more appropriate. A pyramid, not surprisingly, is often expressed by *pyramidalis*.

A shrubby plant might be labeled *fruticosus* or *frutescens*. Upright and columnar? Look for the words *fastigiatus* or *columnaris*. Downright narrow, with nearly parallel sides: *linearis*.

A dwarf plant might be *nanus* or *pumilus*; a creeping one, *repens*; one flat on the ground, *prostratus* or *procumbens*. If they spread in a straggly manner, the specific epithet *divaricatus* is a possibility. If instead the plant climbs, it could be called *scandens*.

SURFACE TEXTURE OR PATTERN

Pleated leaves might be indicated by the word *plicatus*. Woolly ones are often labeled *lanatus*.

Mollis means soft (because the plant is covered with soft hairs); *glaucus* plants are coated in what's called bloom (a fine white powdery coating).

If the surface glistens, it could be called *fulgens*. If it's spiny, *spinousus* is a more appropriate epithet.

Spots might indicated by the word *punctatus*.

FRAGRANCE

Inodorus means a plant has no fragrance. *Aromaticus* and *fragans* mean that it does. But so do *pungens* (pungent), *odoratus* (sweet-smelling), and *foetidus* (fetid, or stinking).

BLOOM TIMES

Some epithets, such as *praecox*, mean simply early. Spring interest is expressed by *vernalis*; summer by *aestivalis*; fall by *autumnalis*, and winter by *hyemalis*.

HABITAT OF ORIGIN

Plants from wet places are often called *palustris* (or *aquaticus*, if they actually live in water). Those from rocky areas may bear the specific epithet *saxatilis*; if sand was in their background, *arenarius* is the word. Woodland denizens may be *sylvaticus* or *sylvestris*; those from above the treeline are *alpinus*. ■

