

BELL COUNTY MASTER GARDENER

Tip of the Week

By Beverly Wickersham

“The Naming of Plants”

When we attempt to identify a wildflower (or any type of plant) by using one of the excellent illustrated books on plant identification, we encounter two kinds of names: the common name and the scientific name. Common names are the older of the two and are easy to pronounce and use. However, knowing and using only the common name can be a disadvantage. First, they may not be useful to people with a different language or dialect. Second, many common names are unique to a given locality or language. For example, the common pansy has at least two hundred known common names: Spanish, French, German, and English names. *Salvia coccinea*, a wildflower that is prolific in the Central Texas area may be referred to in various locations as Scarlet Sage, Red Sage, or Indian Fire. Common names have a place in everyday speech; however, they are not precise enough to be used in serious scientific studies or even in horticultural activities.

Initially, the process of naming plants was lacking in standardization. Although typically the name of a species consisted of a generic name (a noun) followed by one or more Latin modifiers (usually adjectives or descriptive phrases), the length of the name knew no bounds. For example, a species of buttercup was given the following name: ***Ranunculus calycibus retroflexis, pedunculis falcatis, caule erecto, foliis composites*** which means “the buttercup with bent-back sepals, curved flower-stalks, erect stems and compound leaves.” Today, thanks to the work of the great Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778), botanists gradually adopted a set of standard procedures for the naming of plants. In 1753 Linnaeus published the influential work ***Species Plantarum*** ([Species of Plants](#)). In this book he consistently used Latin **binomial** nomenclature instead of the unwieldy **polynomials**. Because of his popularization of the binomial system and because he was responsible for classifying and naming hundreds of organisms, Linnaeus is recognized as the “Father of Taxonomy”.

The [Wildflower](#) magazine offers comfort to the Latin novice: “Do not be intimidated when attempting to pronounce the Latin scientific name. Classical Latin scholars do not always agree on pronunciation (Latin is a dead language), and professional botanists vary substantially in their pronunciation. Simply try to pronounce every syllable and get through it as quickly as possible.”