What's in a (Flower's) Name?

By Diana Thottungal

Scientific, that is to say Latin names are vital to understanding the exact identity and relationships among organisms. But common names also have a place. They can provide identification tips and hint at uses and misuses. They can be associated with charming or horrific legends and tales, even ancient trade routes and calendrical markers. Another useful feature of common names is that they don't change the way a surprising number of the Latin names do after DNA studies. Daisies are still daisies, even though they are now *Leucanthemum vulgare* rather than *Chrysanthemum leucanthemum.*

The selection discussed here consists of flowers that can be found at Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden during the spring.

Jacob's Ladder

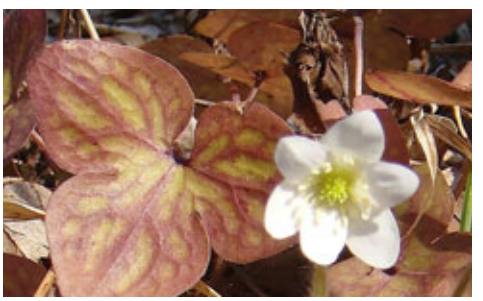
It's the leaves. Because they're compound with small opposite leaflets that evoke a ladder, the plant was first called Ladder Plant. The name seems to have evolved into the more colorful, Biblically-referenced ladder (or staircase) to heaven dreamed of by Jacob while sleeping on a stone pillow; thus, Jacob's Ladder.

Cleavers

They cleave, that is to say, stick...to each other, you, your clothes, animal fur (pulling loose wool from passing sheep led to another common name in rural England: Tax Gatherer). Oddly, this plant is distantly related to and supposed to make a fair substitute for coffee. The ability to stick together gave Cleavers a use: creating disposable sieves to strain little bugs and debris from milk.[1]

Merrybells

Well, okay, Large Flowered Bellwort. Although "Merrybells" is commonly used nowadays in plant catalogs and was used in Edgar T. Wherry's 1948 *Wild Flower Guide,* the name has fallen out of favor in field guides. Maybe it's not dignified enough.



Hepatica

It's funny. The common name we usually use is just the Latin name. That's probably because it sounds prettier than Liverwort, which is the English version of the Latin. And it's called Liverwort because when the first flowers show up in the early spring, the previous year's leaves are still present, looking very liverish indeed.

According to the Doctrine of Signatures, developed by a gentleman named Paracelsus (1491-1541), God marked plants with a sign or signature hinting at their potential medicinal uses; thus the three-lobed leaves meant that the plant was good for dealing with diseases of the three-lobed liver. It isn't.

Trillium

Here's another case of a Latin name turned common name, and for probably at least partly the same reason: it sounds prettier than such alternatives as Stinking Willie, Toadshade, Dishcloth(!). In addition, there are too many alternatives. Just for *Trillium erectum* I found 27 variants:

American True-Love
Bathflower
Bathwort
Bethroot
Bettroot
Birthroot
Birthwort
Bumblebee Root
Daffy-Downdilly
Dishcloth
Ground lily
Ill-scented trillium
Ill-scented Wake-robin
Indian balm
Indian Shamrock
Nosebleed
Purple Trillium
purple wake-robin
rattlesnake root
Red Trillium
Red Wake-Robin
Red-Benjamin
Squawflower
Squawroot
Stinking Benjamin
Stinking Willie
Stinking Dishcloth
Threeleaf Nightshade
Truelove
Wake-robin
Wood Lily

The Beth-, Birth-, Bath- and Squaw- prefixes mean that the plant had found uses either in giving birth or abortion. Wake Robin (season of bloom) and Benjamin are two widespread alternative common names, while the stinking- prefix refers to the fact that this plant does not smell good. Bumblebee root refers to the stinging taste of the root.

Rues, Anemones and Rue Anemones

If ever there was a group of flower names that creates more confusion than enlightenment, it's this one. The plants are all in the same family (*Ranunculaceae*), but other than that they're quite different, as the pictures show. Nevertheless, they share the names Rue and Anemone in various combinations and with different adjectives, at least one of which is utterly irrelevant.

Rue

The Rue are not rueful; the name is from the Old French by way of Greek, and there doesn't seem to be a definition. When the word made it to English, naturally it got contaminated by the already existing word. We have at least three Rues in the Garden, and they are all called Meadow Rue (plus adjective), even the one that grows in the woodland.

Anemone

Anemone recalls *Anemos,* Greek for wind, Anemone being the daughter of the wind. It was an ancient Greek physician who named the flower, referring to the wind-dispersed seeds. And, of course, the flower wasn't any of our Anemones, but a Greek one: Windflower *(Pulsatilla pratensis).*[2]

Rue Anemone

And there's Rue Anemone, combining both names and called that because the flowers look like Anemones while the leaves look Rue-ish.

False Rue Anemone

Finally, we have False Rue Anemone. There don't seem to be any explanations for this one, but the leaves do look Rue-ish, and the flowers do look like little Anemones, so there you go.

Trout Lilies

No one seems to know which of two reasons explain this name. Either it's because the leaves vaguely resemble trout or it's because they pop out of the ground at the beginning of trout season.

Here's a Wikipedia picture of a trout:

and here's a Trout Lily leaf:

Toothworts

Toothworts have been used by the Cherokee and probably other Native Americans as an analgesic, and some authors say, for toothache when mixed with Hazel Alder *(Alnus rugosa)* bark. Oddly, though, that's not the reason for the name. The Doctrine of Signatures arises again. The root of the plant has little toothlike things sticking out of it, thus it's supposed to be good for toothache. [4]

Forget-Me-Nots

Why would this pretty little flower be called Forget-Me-Not? The name comes from Europe where it is the same in German, French, Italian and English. But the stories behind the name differ. In Germany, this flower (or a blue flower) led a man to a cave full of gold and jewels, which he proceeded to gather. An apparition warned him not to forget the best, which, of course, he did; leaving behind the flower which had led him to the treasure. So the cave collapsed, killing the heedless treasure hunter.

In a totally different vein is the story of the armored knight walking with his lady fair along the Danube River where she spotted the little blue flower and asked for it. He climbed down to obtain the token and of course he fell into the river and drowned, but not before tossing the flower to his lady, crying out, "Forget me not."

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Footnotes and References

[1,5] Martin, Laura C., 1974. *Wildflower Folklore.* Fast and McMillan.

[1] Sanders, Jack, 2003. *The Secrets of Wildflowers.* Globe Pequot Press.

[1] http://botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/c/cliver74.html

[2] http://www.bioforceusa.com/pflant-encyclopaedia/pulsatilla_pratensis.php

[3] http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/db/Trout.jpg

[4] Moerman, Daniel E., 2009. *Native American medicinal plants: an ethnobotanical dictionary.* Timber Press.

[4] Garrett, J.T., 2003. *The Cherokee herbal: native plant medicine from the four directions.*

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