



Common names

When people use a common name for a plant, they may discover not everyone agrees on what the plant is. One nickname may stick to several different plants, and confusion results. My favorite is the 'Mother of Thousands'. Perhaps you had a “mother of thousands”, but if so, was it a kalanchoe, spider plant, or saxifrage? All of these are called Mother of Thousands. On the other hand, one of these, saxifrage, is also known as 'Strawberry Begonia' and 'Strawberry Geranium', although saxifrage has nothing to do with strawberries, or begonias, or geraniums! For instance, take “mock orange”. This is the common name for *Philadelphus*, a member of the hydrangea family. While *Philadelphus* grows perfectly well in the northeast, it would be terribly stressed trying to survive a Mojave summer! In this part of the country, “mock orange” is *Pittosporum*, which is from a completely different family. This pretty plant, with dark, ovate leaves and white flowers, is common in Las Vegas landscapes, but must be a houseplant in New York or New England.

For the best information about establishing and maintaining plants, it helps to know the botanical name. One name for two different plants, or three different names for one; is an invitation to babble! This is something that can affect how our plants survive.

Many horticultural guide books avoid the common names problem by emphasizing the botanical one, perhaps putting common names after.

When buying any plant, whether in a three-inch pot or a 30-inch box, know exactly what the plant is. Just because something is called 'palm', it may not grow in your landscape. Is it a *Phoenix*, a *Syagrus*, or a *Butia*? Have you heard the term 'sago palm?' This is a common term for cycads, which are not palms at all. All these plants have different requirements, and in some cases, different pests and diseases. With only the nickname, it is difficult to find the information needed to keep them alive.

Nomenclature can be intimidating, but there are real benefits to learning botanical names. For one thing, it gives information about the plant you are interested in, and even about other plants that might be similar. Take garlic. The scientific name is *Allium sativum*. That name literally means ‘cultivated allium’. The other alliums are onions, leeks, chives, and shallots, giving the correct idea that they grow in similar conditions.



Allium sativum/garlic

These Latin-esque names can be entertaining. Tomatoes were originally feared, hence they became *Solanum lycopersicon* – wolf peach.

The botanical name should be on the tag. It is a good idea to look for it when buying a tree, vine or a shrub. When spending good money for a plant, it makes sense at least to get its actual name.

This is of course in addition to doing what you would do normally when buying a plant: look at it, make sure that the roots are healthy, leaves are intact, the stem is sturdy, and no insects are attacking the foliage. Then, you will be able to keep your plants at their best.

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