



Stephen & Kristin Pategas

in the garden by Stephen and Kristin Pategas

Fun With Plant Names

We work with plants constantly and we typically use their scientific names which are in Latin. These names confirm the identity of the plant since many plants have multiple common names or one common name is shared by more than one plant. A number of plants have common names that are also their scientific names:

magnolia, camellia, podocarpus or pitosporum. So, you are already speaking Latin when you discuss them.

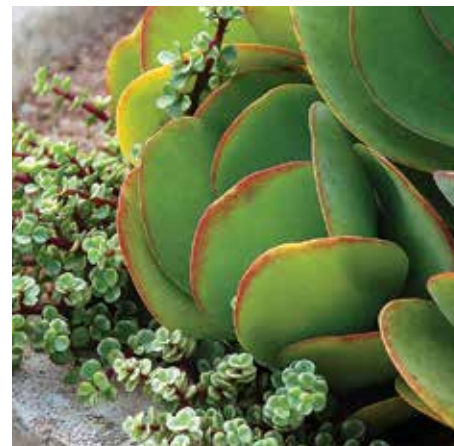
There are also plants with common names that provide an interesting description of a particular characteristic. Many names relate to animals (gator, squid, spider) or their body parts (ear, foot, tongue).

There are also names that are physical shapes (cylinder, ribbon, needle) or objects (mask, saw, trumpet). Some words are more ethereal or represent motion (snow, whirling). The fun part is that when you hear the name and see the plant, you look for the relationship. When it becomes apparent you may even smile.

All of these plants can potentially grow in Central Florida, however make sure you have the proper growing conditions.

- Alligator plant - *Acanthus montanus* (very spiny leaves)
- Squid agave - *Agave bracteosa* (yes, it does look like one)
- African mask - *Alocasia x amazonica* 'Polly' (mask shaped variegated leaves)
- Foxtail fern - *Asparagus densiflorus* 'Meyerii' (very fuzzy and tail-like)
- Lady of the night orchid - *Brassavola nodosa* (sensuously fragrant at night)
- Snow bush - *Breytia distichia* (white splotches on the leaves)
- Spider plant - *Chlorophytum comosum* (it even travels, but slowly)
- Bow tie vine - *Dalechampia dioscoraeifolia* (trendy purple bracts look like bow ties)
- Rabbit's foot fern - *Davallia denticulata* (exposed roots are furry)
- Whirling butterfly - *Guara lindheimeri* (get ready for takeoff!)
- Lobster-claw - *Heliconia rostrata* (this claw of a bloom is safe to shake)
- Lifesaver cactus - *Huernia confusa* (amazing look-alike but not edible)
- Bottle palm - *Hyophorbe lagenicaulis* (swollen base on its trunk)
- Fiber optic grass - *Isolepis cernua* (remember those vintage fiber optic sculptures?)
- Red shrimp plant - *Justicia brandegeana* (flower bracts look like a shrimp)
- Cow's tongue/flapjack plant/paddle plant - *Kalanchoe thyrsiflora* (thick round flat leaves)
- Nodding hibiscus - *Malva viscus arboreus* (a droopy blossom)
- Bunny ears cactus - *Opuntia microdasys* (they look furry but don't touch)
- Cat's whiskers - *Orthosiphon stamineus* (aptly named for the blossoms)
- Devil's backbone - *Pedilanthus tithymaloides* (zig zag stems)
- Needle palm - *Rhaphidophyllum hystrix* (serious needles adorn the base)
- Firecracker plant - *Russelia equisetiformis* (the start of a flower explosion)
- Cylinder sansevieria - *Sansevieria cylindrical* (cylinder-like leaves)
- Saw palmetto - *Serenoa repens* (small teeth on the stems)
- Starfish flower - *Stapelia gigantea* (blossom has an uncanny resemblance)
- Yellow trumpet tree - *Tabebuia umbellata* (trumpet shaped bloom)
- Black bat plant - *Tacca chantrieri* (bat-shaped black flower)
- Winged elm - *Ulmus alata* (winged corky protrusions on the branches)
- Spanish bayonet - *Yucca aloifolia* (very sharp pointed leaves)

Let us know if you have other interesting common names to add to the list - and if you smiled.



Pictured top left: Fiber optic grass; top right: African mask; bottom left: Cow's tongue; bottom right: Cat's whiskers.

Photos by Stephen G. Pategas, Hortus, Oasis.