

in the garden BY STEPHEN AND KRISTIN PATEGAS



We All Speak Latin In The Garden

By Stephen and Kristin Pategas

Surprise! You already speak Latin. If you are from farther north where these plants thrive, you probably uttered these Latin words at one time or another: *hosta*, *hydrangea*, *iris*, *mahonia*, or *wisteria*. They are genus names for plants that share the genus names with common names.



Here in the Orlando area there are many genus names that are used as common names for our everyday plants. These names can be heard in conversations at garden centers as well as at Starbucks: *allamanda*, *aloe*, *bougainvillea*, *bromeliad*, *caladium*, *camellia*, *cyclamen*, *hibiscus*, *lantana*, *ligustrum*, *mandevilla*, *magnolia*, *petunia*, *philodendron*, *pittosporum*, *plumbago*, *podocarpus*, *salvia*, *viburnum*, *yucca*, and *zinnia*.

Why use a botanical name for a plant?

***Kalanchoe thyrsiflora* - what's your favorite common name for this plant?**

If common names are so common why even bother with botanical names? Although we can have civil garden-

ing conversations without getting uppity with our language, in many cases those botanical names eliminate plant confusion.

The same common name is often used for more than one plant. When you ask for a plant by a common name you may not get the plant you want. Some plants have multiple common names which everyone may not be aware of. We grow *Kalanchoe thyrsiflora*, a unique-looking succulent that appeared locally a few years ago and is commonly known as cow's tongue, but in some gardening circles is also called flapjack, desert cabbage, plakkie, white

lady, or paddle plant. Now, cow's tongue seems like a unique enough name, but there are at least six distinctly different plants that share that same common name:

- A cactus (*Opuntia engelmannii* var. *linguiformis*)
- A tree (*Bauhinia jenningsii*)
- An herb (*Borago officinalis*)
- A fern (*Polypodium phyllitidis*)
- A succulent (*Gasteria excelsa*)
- The succulent we grow (*Kalanchoe thyrsiflora*)

So be careful how you ask for it, you may get a tree, fern, cactus, herb, or the wrong succulent instead.

Palm grass is a common name for two different plants that have similar looking foliage. However they grow differently and have different growing requirements. *Setaria palmifolia* is an aggressively spreading plant with a tall grass-like flower spike and is less cold hardy than *Curculigo capitulata* which is only slightly aggressive with small rarely seen yellow blossoms at the base of the plant. Plant the wrong palm grass (*S. palmifolia*) and it will freeze more easily and take over your garden.

Some common names are downright confusing, what kind of plant would you expect to get if you asked for Persian violet or Persian primrose? We'd expect an exotic violet or primrose. Well, how about neither. They are two rarely used common names for the colorful cyclamen (*Cyclamen persicum*), a perennial that grows from tuberous roots and is neither a violet nor a primrose.

If it matters that you have the right plant in your garden then take a stab at using their botanical names and help keep a dead but gardener-useful language alive. ■



Curculigo capitulata, the preferred palm grass



Neither a primrose or a violet, it's a cyclamen in the primrose family.

Scared to say it out loud? Get help here:

<http://www.finegardening.com/> (search for pronunciation guide)

<http://roundrobin2001.0catch.com/audio.html> (includes sites with audio files)

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A quick refresher on botanical Latin nomenclature: The genus *Wisteria* and the species *sinensis* combine to create the botanical name *Wisteria sinensis* for Chinese wisteria. *Podocarpus macrophyllus* is what we know as yew podocarpus or just podocarpus.