

Plant names have rich history

By Robert Naczi

Plants often bear a bewildering array of names. For example, Boxelder, Ash-leaved Maple, *Acer negundo*, *Érable à Giguère*, Manitoba Maple, Lelé, and Acezintle are names that refer to the same species, and this is not all of the names applied to the plant! Why are there so many names?

Despite the multitude of names possessed by some plant species, these names boil down to two kinds: common names and scientific names. Common names are those names that are used by the everyday person when referring to a plant. Scientific names are coined and used by scientists. Common names are in the vernacular, and thus can take any form. Scientific names are Latin or latinized, and consist of two italicized words, the first of which is capitalized.

Given these characteristics, common names and scientific names are easy to recognize. Boxelder, Ash-leaved Maple, *Érable à Giguère*, Manitoba Maple, Lelé, and Acezintle are all common names. *Acer negundo* is the only scientific name in the list.

The geographic range of *Acer negundo* provides a clue to the diversity of common names borne by this tree. For this tree has a vast native range: southern Canada south to the mountains of northern Central America. People in different regions often refer to the same plant species by different names, especially when their languages differ. Boxelder to a Delawarean is *Érable à Giguère* to a Quebecois and Lelé to a resident of Veracruz.

Common names reflect rich cultural traditions, especially when a plant is important in human affairs. Consider such fascinating and colorful common names as Adam-and-Eve (an orchid native to eastern North American forests that usually has a pair of tubers linked by roots for its underground parts), Catnip, Forget-me-not, Fly-poison, Maidenhair Fern, Shadbush (a small tree of the rose family that blooms when the shad run), and Toothache Grass.

Manifesting the importance of serpents in our history, fully 11 different species of eastern North American plants have the com-



Submitted photo

Fly-poison is a common name that describes the plant's use.

mon name of "snakeroot" and 14 different species have "rattlesnake" as part of their common name. "Rattlesnake-master" is an especially compelling appellation among these plants, most of which were used to treat snakebites.

Scientific names reflect interesting aspects of plants, too. *Jeffersonia diphylla* was named to honor Thomas Jefferson. Both words of the scientific name *Urtica urens* translate as "stinging" to emphasize the intense stinging one feels upon touching this nettle. When the scientific name *Callicarpa americana* (a shrub with stunning pinkish-purple fruits) is translated, it means "beautiful fruit from America." Aptly, the common name for this plant is American Beautyberry.

Scientific names are more precise and universal than common names. By the rules of scientific nomenclature, each species may bear only one scientific name.

Despite having over six common names, *Acer negundo* is the only scientific name used to refer to this species throughout the world. In turn, each scientific name is applied to only one species. The advantage of this rule becomes obvious when recalling the wide use of "snakeroot" as a common name. Another merit of scientific names is their use for every species. Many species of plants have no common names, such as hundreds of species of grasses, sedges, and rushes.

Editor's note: Robert Naczi is curator of the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium, Delaware State University. The herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, and call 857-6450 (Dr. Robert Naczi) for more information about this article.

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