What's in a plant's name?

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Last month, this column featured Turk's-cap lily (Lilium superbum), and that got me thinking about other plants that have, in a sense, named themselves. Numerous other Delaware native wildflowers have common names that are derived from their appearance or other features.

One great example is turtlehead (Chelone glabra). When you see this flower, you'll know how it got this moniker. Another animal-like lookalike is lizard's tail (Saururus cernuus), which has a flower cluster that looks like a tail. Cat-tail (Typha ssp.) also has an easily recognized inflorescence.

Pink lady's slipper, or moccasin flower, (Cypripedium acaule) is a gorgeous large orchid. It really does look like a lady could slip her foot into this pink pump.

Indian pipe (Monotropa uniflora) is another good example. Here, the flower is the bowl of the pipe, and the stem is, well, the stem; and everything is white like an old-fashioned colonial Dutch clay pipe. You may wonder how a plant can be all white; since, with no green at all, there is no photosynthesis. This parasitic plant gets its energy from a fungus host, which in turn gets its energy through a mycorrhizal relationship with a tree. Indian pipe is not usually propagated because of these complex relationships.

In Jack-in-the-pulpit (Arisaema triphyllum), the flower cluster (spadix) is the "Jack" under the pupil-like modified leaf (spathe).

In other cases, the plant name comes from nonfloral parts. The shape of the leaf inspired the names of both arrowhead (Sagittaria sp.), and liverleaf (Hepatica sp.). Bloodroot (Sanguinaria canadensis) is another descriptive, if somewhat gruesome, name; here a bright red sap oozes dramatically when the underground stem is cut. The leaves of trout lily (Erythronium americanum) are speckled.

And then there's color; blue-eyed grass (Sisyrinchium sp.), which is really a member of the iris family rather than a grass; cardinal flower (Lobelia cardinalis) — yup, bright red; and for obvious reasons: violets (Viola spp.), blues (Houstonia spp.), goldenrod (Solidago spp.), and redbud grass (Tridens flavus).

An old favorite of mine is black-eyed Susan (Rudbeckia hirta). Among our non-natives are butter and eggs (Linaria vulgaris), lovely pale and deep yellow; scarlet pimpernel (Anagallis arvensis), also called poor man's barometer because it closes with impending bad weather; and purple loosestrife (Lythrum salicaria) — nice color, but an invasive weed.

Odor brings up an interesting assortment of plant names: from the disagreeable skunk cabbage (Symplocarpus foetidus), and stinking Benjamin (Trillium erectum); to the pleasant sweet pepper bush (Clethra alnifolia); sweet bay magnolia (Magnolia virginiana); and spicebush (Lindera benzoin).

Medicinal uses are evident in the impressively named heal-all (Prunella vulgaris), feverfew (Tanacetum parthenium, a non-native), and several plants called snakeroot because they were used to treat snakebite.

Finally, some names may just leave you wondering, like enchanter's nightshade (Circaea lutetiana), and viper's bugloss (Echium vulgare, a nonnative).

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.