

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 lookalike is lizard's tail (*Saururus cernuus*), which has a flower cluster that curves like a tail. Cat-tail (*Typha* spp.) 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 pulpit-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.), bluets (*Houstonia* spp.), golden-



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These wildflowers are well-named — turtlehead (*Chelone* sp.), above, pink lady's slipper (*Cypripedium acaule*), below left, and Jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*), below right.



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rod (*Solidago* spp.), and redtop grass (*Tridens flavus*).

An old favorite of mine is black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*). Among our non-natives are butter and eggs (*Linaria vulgaris*), in 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 (*Lin-*

dera 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.

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