The A to Z of plant names

From *Acronychia oblongifolia* to *Zieria smithii*, the scientific or botanical names of plants are based on sound scientific principles. The plant naming system was devised by the Swedish Botanist, Carl Linnaeus (1707 – 1778), in the mid 18th century.

One of the key objectives of assigning scientific names to plants is to create an internationally acceptable name that will be understood anywhere in the world. Before a plant name is accepted into the International Code of Nomenclature, information relating to its origins, detailed identification characteristics, the name and information about the plant collector must be recorded and published in a recognised journal or book.

When a new plant is discovered, a typical portion is harvested, dried, pressed and then stored at a Botanic Gardens Herbarium as a specimen for future reference. Contemporary herbariums also store photographic images of the specimen, enabling on-line comparison and research.

The scientific name is generally comprised of two parts and is called the binomial. The first name denotes the *Genus*, that is, the closely related group to which the plant belongs. The second name identifies the species of the plant, that is, an adjective which distinguishes the plant from its relatives.

Both the *Genus* and *species* name are written in botanical Latin, the universal language of plant names. The accepted method of recording plant names is to italicize both the *Genus* and *species* name, using an uppercase letter only for the first letter of the *Genus*.

The scientific name often describes a characteristic of the plant:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scientific Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>alba</em></td>
<td>white</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>citrinus</em></td>
<td>citrus-like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>edulis</em></td>
<td>edible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>grandiflora</em></td>
<td>with grand flowers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*e.g. Araucaria cunninghamii*

Sometimes the scientific name commemorates a person or place, or it may be a reference to the name bestowed on the plant by the Indigenous Australians.

An example of a scientific name commemorating a person is the hoop pine, *Araucaria cunninghamii*. The *Genus* part of the name, *Araucaria*, signifies the South American native name for the first species collected within this group of plants, which was in Chile. The species name commemorates the explorer and plant collector, **Alan Cunningham** (1791 – 1839), who first described the hoop pine while forging a way through the mountains of South-East Queensland.
Gold Coast Floral Emblem

The first Banksia plants collected were by Sir Joseph Banks (1743 – 1840) while he was on Captain Cook’s exploratory voyage on the Endeavour in 1770. The Genus name Banksia commemorates Sir Joseph Banks, who went on to be the Curator of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, England. Banksia aemula is the floral emblem for both the Gold Coast and the Regional Botanic Gardens. The species name aemula is derived from the Latin word meaning ‘similar’ and refers to the likeness of Banksia aemula to Banksia serrata.

Where are the rules made?

The International Code of Nomenclature outlines the methods and rules for naming plants. The system is governed by an International Botanical Congress, whose aims include the provision of names that are logical and precise, as well as universally accepted.

Common Names

Anyone can come up with a common name, although some are very well known. Gum tree, daisy and wattle are all common names but there are many hundreds of species of each. Therefore, the more exact scientific binomial is the only way to ensure the correct plant is being discussed. Communication is an integral part of horticulture and using the correct name at the appropriate time will eliminate misidentification.

Visit the Friends’ Centre and ask for more information on the correct names of your favourite plants, or get some tips on plant identification at a Friends workshop.