



By Roger C. Styer

What's in a Name?

Perennials, common names and marketing.

Recently, I purchased a book, *100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names* by Diana Wells (1997, Algonquin Books). This book goes into the history of the flower and how it was discovered, named, used and popularized. What I found interesting was how some flowers became known by names other than what the botanists gave them. These “common” names were usually associated with fragrance, medicinal uses, household uses or some other arcane reason, all of which were easier to pronounce and remember than the botanical name. I think everyone knows how the poinsettia got its name, but do you know how marigold got its name? Marigolds were considered flowers of the Virgin Mary and were used to decorate church altars and called “Mary’s gold.”

I have been trying for the past few years to grapple with perennials. With perennials becoming more and more popular, growers are dealing with a wide range of plants they may know nothing about. Consumers are

buying more perennials as they get more exposure in magazines, television and the landscape. Information on how to grow different perennials in the greenhouse and landscape is still lacking, but more emphasis is being placed on this area by researchers, gardeners and columns such as “Perennial Solutions,” page 78. So, I am hopeful that we can supply enough correct growing information to keep this perennial trend going longer.

But the real problem with perennials is their names. The purists, such as botanists, researchers and true plant enthusiasts, like to throw around their knowledge of all the scientific names for these plants, and expect everyone else to go along with their game. I am not an advocate of using Latin names, having avoided taking the plant taxonomy course in graduate school. I believe if you can’t pronounce or spell the name, then you shouldn’t use it. That’s my take on plant taxonomy, and I don’t think I’m alone!

When marketing plants to the masses, you need to consider names as well as plant quality, availability, labels, pots and displays. There has been some discussion about the dumbing-down of America. It is true — many Americans want things to be simpler. How many people who shop at the big box stores can pronounce Latin names? Yes, they want perennials to be in flower in order to purchase them, but what do they call them? We need to make perennial names more appealing so the average consumer will be attracted to them and know what to ask for. I know the plant industry views this as selling out, but we are in the business of selling plants, not teaching plant taxonomy.

USE WHAT *THEY* KNOW

Many perennials already have common names and quite interesting ones at that. I

compiled a list of some of the more compelling ones (see sidebar). In the trade, we already use bleeding heart, butterfly bush, daylily and hollyhock as selling names. But wouldn’t it be more exciting to use red-hot poker, cupid’s dart and money plant as names also? Now, some purists will argue that there are several common names per plant and that they may be regional, so getting agreement is difficult. Well, the power of the media can take care of that problem. But it starts with our industry first — with what we commonly call the different perennials and what our media spokespersons call them. Get the label makers to change the names, advertise the common names, get the garden show people to call them by common names and arrange your displays by common names. How about branding perennials using common names?

To reinforce the power of common names, consider the following two examples. Daylilies are one of the top two best-selling perennials, but does Martha Stewart call them *Hemerocallis*? St. John’s-wort became popular for its medicinal properties, but does the media call it *Hypericum*?

To quote Diana Wells from her book, “Botanists live in their own world, however, and it’s a useful one. Who are we to argue with them? After all, we have plenty to think about, like love and war, taxes, politics and gardening.” I’m not arguing with the botanists about what they name plants, but I am strongly suggesting we use more interesting common names to sell them. GPN

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PERENNIALS

COMMON NAMES	TRADE NAMES
Bleeding Heart	Dicentra
Butterfly Bush	Buddleia
Daylily	Hemerocallis
Forget-Me-Not	Myosotis
Hollyhock	Alcea
Lady’s Mantle	Alchemilla
Red-Hot Poker	Kniphofia
Black-Eyed Susan	Rudbeckia
Bear’s Breeches	Acanthus
Cupid’s Dart	Catanache
Purple Coneflower	Echinacea
Fleabane	Erigeron
St. John’s-wort	Hypericum
Money Plant	Lunaria
Bee Balm	Monarda