

Botanical names basics

Plant names are quite often misunderstood and misused, but it is important to pay attention to plant names because they tell you exactly which plant you are buying, almost in the same way that a part or model name or number tells you if this is the correct part for the purpose you have chosen. Unless you get the right part it will not work properly if at all. If you don't get the specific plant you are looking for it might end half or twice the size you wanted.

All plants have what might be described as a family name and a first or proper name. The Latin name is comparable to the family name for example the Smiths. The variety name is like a first name for example Smith, John T. unless you know exactly what the full name is; you will not get the correct plant or Smith. Plants which are the wild or original version of the plant have no first name; they may have the equivalent of a hyphenated name which usually includes the Latin for a description of some sort of plant characteristic.

Varieties of plants which have been created by cross breeding are named by the person who created the variety. The variety name is always in quotes. An example is *Athyrium niponicum* 'Pictum'. *Athyrium* is the name of a family group of ferns, *niponicum* means it originally came from Japan. *Pictum* is the name given to it by the person who hybridized the variety. The common name is Japanese painted fern. *Athyrium felix-femina* is still a fern but looks quite different.



Most common names are not distinctive enough to allow the purchaser to pick the right plant. Very often the same common name is applied to numerous different plants. One example is forget-me-not, which is applied to three different families of plants, that all have blue flowers:

anchusa a tall long blooming perennial, best suited to hot dry sites, well-drained soil and blooms in the summer, *brunnera* a low maintenance perennial that prefers shade, blooms in late spring and grows slowly, some have variegated leaves and then *myositis sylvatica* a biennial that prefers cool weather,



moist soil, and shaded areas, blooms in spring and will completely take over your garden if you turn your back for too long, and is likely the plant we most often think of as a forget me not.



This is a simplified explanation, but I hope it explains why plant names are important.

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If you have garden questions please contact us at
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