

Live Free and Dig with the Littleton Garden Club *How's your Latin?*

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Littleton Garden Club

On "Jeopardy!" the clue was, "Another name for Moccasin Flower." The answer was, "What is the Pink Lady Slipper?" I remember thinking that likening the delicate lady slipper to a moccasin isn't nearly as elegant as calling it a slipper.

Pink Lady Slippers are known by other common names, including Ladies Slipper Orchid, American Valerian, and Squirrel Shoes. This is an excellent example of why we use Latin names to ensure we're talking about the same plant.

Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus introduced a system of binomial nomenclature in the mid-1700s to classify plants. The system uses two Latin words for each plant, the first representing the genus and the second representing the species.

Linnaeus grouped plants according to similarities, such as leaves, flowers, and fruit. The genus is the larger of the two groups and can be considered a last name, for example, Smith.

The species can be viewed as a first name, as in John.

The genus is always capitalized and listed first. The species follows the genus name in lowercase, and the entire Latin name is underlined or italicized. An advantage of using Latin names is that they are unique to each plant, unlike common names, which can vary from region to region. No matter where you talk about a plant, the Latin name remains the same.

Some botanical Latin words reveal a plant's characteristics, especially the species name. How's your high school Latin?

Colors are often reflected in the species name, and yellow can be expressed as flavus, luteus, and citrinus. Red is rubrum and rosy pink is roseus. Purple is purpureus. White is albus; black is nigrum; silver is argenteus; gold is aureus, and on and on.

The species name sometimes reflects the growth habit. Graceful and slender plants might be designated gracilis, globe-shaped, or globosus. Shrubby

plants often have the species name fruticosus, and dwarf plants often have the species name nanus. Plants that grow flat on the ground are prostratus or procumbens.

Sometimes, the species name indicates the part of the world where the plant grows. Several local wildflowers include the species name borealis, which means northern. An example is the Foam Flower, with the Latin name *Tiarella borealis*.

The plant's textures and patterns may also be reflected in the species name, with a woolly one labeled lanatus. Mollis means soft. Variegated leaves or flowers are sometimes labeled variegatus, and spots might be indicated by the Latin word punctatus.

The Latin name for our Pink Lady Slipper is *Cypripedium acaule*. *Cypripedium* is a genus comprising over 45 species. *Cypripedium* are very different in appearance, size, and location. However, all have a distinctive slipper-shaped pouch that acts as a trap for in-

sects and is a key part of their pollination strategy. For the Pink Lady Slipper, the Latin name *acaule* means stemless, referring to the plant's leafless flowering stem.

You might be wondering about the genus name. In this case, you need to know some Greek too. *Cypripedium* is the Latin version of the Greek words *Kupris pedion*, which means the foot of Venus. Well, at least it doesn't translate to shoes worn by squirrels.

Long ago, I studied Latin in high school, and we chanted, "Latin is a language as old as it can be; first, it killed the Romans, and now it's killing me." Little did I realize that Latin would be useful when you talk plants and that I would use it decades after high school! Special thanks to my Latin teachers, Mr. Toomey and Mrs. Hayden, of Littleton High School circa 1960s.

For more information about the club and our meetings, please visit www.littletonnhgardenclub.org.