

PROPER USAGE OF PLANT NAMES IN PUBLICATIONS

A Guide for Writers and Editors

Kathy Musial, Huntington Botanical Gardens, August 2017

Scientific names (also known as “Latin names”, “botanical names”)

- A unit of biological classification is called a “taxon” (plural, “taxa”). This is defined as a taxonomic group of any rank, e.g. genus, species, subspecies, variety. To allow scientists and others to clearly communicate with each other, taxa have names consisting of Latin words. These words may be derived from languages other than Latin, in which case they are referred to as “latinized”.
- A species name consists of two words: the genus name followed by a second name (called the specific epithet) unique to that species; e.g. *Hedera helix*. Once the name has been mentioned in text, the genus name may be abbreviated in any immediately subsequent listings of the same species, or other species of the same genus, e.g. *Hedera helix*, *H. canariensis*. The first letter of the genus name is always upper case and the first letter of the specific epithet is always lower case. Latin genus and species names should always be italicized when they appear in text that is in roman type; conversely, these Latin names should be in roman type when they appear in italicized text.
- Names of suprageneric taxa (above the genus level, e.g. families, Asteraceae, etc.), are never italicized when they appear in roman text. The first letter of these names is always upper case.
- Subspecific taxa (subspecies, variety, forma) have a third epithet that is always separated from the specific epithet by the rank designation “var.”, “ssp.” or “subsp.”, or “forma” (sometimes abbreviated as “f.”); e.g. *Alnus glutinosa* var. *denticulata*. The first letter of the third epithet is always lower case. This epithet should be in the same type as the genus and species epithets, e.g. italicized when in roman text and vice versa. However, the rank designation should not be italicized. Note that the term “var.” is only used for scientifically described varieties, not for cultivars. Undesignated trinomials (e.g. *Alnus glutinosa denticulata*) are not allowed under the current rules of botanical nomenclature so their use should be avoided.
- A taxon of hybrid origin is indicated by a multiplication sign (“×”) between the genus and species epithets, e.g. *Coleus × hybridus*. Proper usage is the multiplication sign (“×”) rather than the letter “x”, and should be used when technically feasible. When the multiplication sign is used it should be placed against the first letter of the specific epithet, not separated by a space, e.g. *Coleus ×hybridus*. (However, this rule is not always followed, even in some technical publications.) If the letter “x” must be used it should be separated from the first letter of the specific epithet by a space, and not italicized, e.g. *Coleus x hybridus*.
- When the genus name is used alone as a scientific name (for instance, when describing some scientific or technical aspect of that genus, such as the number of species or its native habitat, e.g. “..over two hundred species of *Aloe*..”), it is capitalized and italicized as described above. When the genus name is used as a vernacular name within text or captions, it is not italicized. For vernacular usage, when in the singular the first letter of the genus name can be either upper or lower case, consistent with the style for other vernacular names in the text. When in the plural, the first letter of the genus name should always be in lower case, e.g. “many magnolias bloom in January”, unless it is the first word in a sentence.

Cultivar names

- A cultivar name designates a taxon usually of horticultural origin (the word “cultivar” is a contraction of “cultivated variety”) or selected from the wild. The cultivar name follows the last epithet of the scientific name and is designated by single quotation marks, e.g. *Salvia officinalis* ‘Tricolor’. It should never be designated by double quotation marks or the abbreviation “cv.”
- In roman text, where the scientific name is italicized, the cultivar name is not italicized.
- A cultivar name can consist of more than one word; the first letter of each word is upper case (e.g. *Aglaonema commutatum* ‘Silver Queen’). Exceptions are conjunctions and prepositions other than the first word of the name, in all languages (e.g. *Camellia japonica* ‘Blood of China’, *C. j.* ‘Comte de Toll’).
- In hyphenated cultivar names, the first letter of any words after hyphens are lower case (e.g. *Campanula pyramidalis* ‘Aureo-variegata’)
- Once the entire name has been mentioned in text, in any immediately subsequent listing the genus name or both the genus and species name may be abbreviated if desired (e.g. *C. p.* ‘Aureo-variegata’).

- A cultivar name may be listed alone, without its scientific name, as long as it is clear in the text to which name that cultivar belongs. Often a scientific name will be listed in text, followed somewhere later (usually in the same paragraph) by descriptions (or other relevant text) of various cultivars of that same taxon. Similarly, these cultivars may be listed alone as long as it is clear in the text to which scientific name they belong.
- Many cultivars are of hybrid origin, in which case the cultivar name directly follows a genus name. These names are never separated by an “x” or multiplication sign; e.g. *Canna* ‘Endeavor’ is correct, *Canna* × ‘Endeavor’ is not.

Common (vernacular) names

- Common names should never be italicized when in roman text.
- There are no rules governing the usage of common names, as there are for scientific names. The most important point is that common name usage should be consistent throughout an article, a periodical, or a book.
 - The simplest method is for each word of the common name to have its first letter in upper case (e.g. Honey Myrtle, Oil Palm). This format most readily sets off a plant’s common name as a name (and not just a descriptor), just as a person’s name has its initial letters capitalized (e.g. Jane Smith, not jane smith). However, in hyphenated names (e.g. Love-in-a-mist) usually only the first word is capitalized.
 - Another method is to list the common name in double quotation marks (e.g. “Oil Palm”); however, this practice is discouraged in order to avoid potential confusion with cultivar names.
 - To avoid potential confusion, common names used in text should not be in all lower case. For some common names this can result in ambiguity as to what the name actually is, especially for names that have shapes, sizes, colors, seasons, geographical terms or other descriptive words as part of the name. Consider the ambiguity of the following examples:
 - “The flowering maple is blooming now” could refer to any maple (*Acer* spp.), vs. “The Flowering Maple is blooming now (= *Abutilon* spp.)
 - “The wild lilacs were lovely this year” (*Syringa* spp.) vs. “The Wild Lilacs were lovely this year” (= *Ceanothus sanguineus*) ?
 - “The golden wattle was covered with flowers”, where the word “golden” is describing the flower color of a “wattle” (a vernacular term for some species of *Acacia*), vs. “The Golden Wattle was covered with flowers”, where a specific wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*) is being referred to.
- Any part of a common name that is a proper name must be capitalized (e.g. Bells of Ireland, bells of Ireland, Mexican Flame Vine, Mexican flame vine)
- It has been recommended that an old-time convention for common names be revived, where a hyphen separates the words in common names that do not correctly reflect the botanical classification of the plant, e.g. Rock-rose (*Cistus*) is not a rose (*Rosa*), Sea-holly (*Eryngium*) is not a holly (*Ilex*), Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga*) is not a fir, (*Abies*) etc.
- When common names are included in lists (e.g. in an index), headings, or are components of encyclopedic entries, they are visually set off clearly when in all upper case (“all caps”) of one to two point sizes smaller than the other words in the list, heading, or entry.
- A genus name is often used as a vernacular name for a single species (e.g. Calathea), more than one species (e.g. calatheas), or the entire genus or its family (e.g. marantas). See under “Scientific Names” above.
- Non-Latin common names of groups of plants (e.g. orchids, palms) always have their first letter in lower case, whether singular or plural, except where they occur as the first word in a sentence.
- The common names of families should have the first letter of each word capitalized (e.g. Lily Family, Trumpet Tree Family). however, the word “family” can either be capitalized or not; again, there are no firm rules but consistent usage is to be encouraged.

Trademarked names

- Trademarks are proprietary names that should be used in accordance with trademark laws and must always contain either the ™ or ® symbols (the latter for registered trademarks only). Trademarks are marketing tools and are not equivalent to nor can they be substituted for cultivar names. Trademark names should never appear in single quotation marks nor should they be italicized when in text in roman type. Trademarks serve only as brand names to identify the source or origin of the plant, not the plant itself. There is no nomenclatural requirement to include a trademark name as part of the plant name, and to lessen confusion it is preferable to list plants with only their

scientific and cultivar names. However, if there is some compelling reason to include it, the proper way to list a plant name containing a trademark would be, for example, *Magnolia grandiflora* 'Monlia' Majestic Beauty™.

Trade designations

- Trade designations are names that may be used solely for marketing purposes when a cultivar name is deemed unsuitable. These names should not be confused with trademarks, as trade designations function to identify the product rather than the source or origin. Trade designations should be listed together with the plant name and set off typographically in upper case letters, usually one or two point sizes smaller, e.g. *Alstroemeria* 'Stakrist' KRISTINA.