

Deciphering plant tags?



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Question: I want to choose native plants for my garden, but sometimes I have a hard time deciphering the nursery tags. How do I know a plant is really the native one I am looking for?

Answer: This is a great question. Plant tags should follow the rules of botanical nomenclature, but can be confusing. Once you understand this special language, you can buy plants with confidence.

WHY NOT USE COMMON NAMES?

Many gardeners use common names for plants they have grown up with. But common names can lead to confusion. For example, Cat's Ear's, a wildflower found in Oregon, is also called Tolmeii's Cat's Ears, Tomeii's Star Tulip and Pussy Ears. Only by using its botanical name, *Calochortus tolmeii*, can you be certain you have the plant you are searching for.

We have botanical nomenclature for plants thanks to the work of Carl Linnaeus in the 1700s. The latin name taxonomy sorts plants into continuously more specific categories by attributes (bark, flowers, leaf shape, etc). For most gardeners, the last three categories: family, genus and species are the most important to know.

Plant tags usually only have the last two: genus and species. The species part of the name is often adjective-like, providing the location, color, size, shape, origin, habitat of the plant or the name of the person who first listed it.

In the past month I purchased three plants. Let's take a look at the tags.

■ One from a native plant nursery was tagged *Camassia quamash* (Common Blue Camas). Easy research shows it is one of several camas species native to Oregon. But if your plant was tagged *Camassia leichtlinii* 'Sacajawea', you would have come across a nativar of another Oregon species: Great Camas. A nativar is a native species that has been selectively cultivated for a human desired trait (in this case white blossoms). You can determine



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Plant tags relay a variety of information about a specific plant, including genus and species.

this from the tag, as the name *Sacajawea* follows the species name, and is highlighted by a single quote. If this had not been a native plant, we would have called it a cultivar instead.

■ A second plant I purchased from a Master Gardener sale was tagged *Aster x frikartii* 'Monch'. The "x" indicates a hybrid plant (a cross of two different species). Some research showed this aster (which looks similar in some ways to Oregon native *Aster subspicatus*, or Douglas Aster) is a cross between *Aster amellus* (European Michaelmas Daisy) and *Aster thomsonii* (an aster from the Himalayas), and named Monch by the developer after a Swiss Alp.

■ A third plant I purchased from Young's Garden Center. The tag only says *Penstemon Cha Cha™ 'Cherry'*. So we know it is of the genus

Penstemon, and the quote tells us it is a cultivar. The back of the tag also indicates it is a hybrid, but not the specific cross.

WHY DOES IT MATTER THAT WE GET THE NAME RIGHT?

The exact plant can really matter. We plant native plants as a way to restore lost habitat for native insects, particularly pollinators. According to the Xerces Society, nearly 75% of all plants on earth require insect pollination.

Humans have been selectively breeding plants to enhance specific attributes for more than 10,000 years. Often the changes are beneficial. But sometimes our manipulations have unintended consequences. For example, changes in blossom color or shape can interfere with attraction or access to the bloom by

pollinators.

Planting your garden exclusively with cultivars or exotics (plants that may be native somewhere else in the world, or are hybrids or cultivars of non-natives) may create food deserts for many native insects. Fewer insects (and decreased pollination for fruits and seeds) also means less food for birds and other animals.

It is also true some native insects can be supported by certain cultivars, natives and even exotics. But we need to know what we are planting in our gardens and make sure they fit our purpose. Continuing cases of European honey bee colony collapse disorder indicates the importance of having a diverse population of pollinators.

Some native insects and plants develop unique and dependent relationships with each other. A decline in habitat for Kinkaid's lupine (*Lupinus oregonus*) resulted in the near extinction of an important Willamette Valley pollinator, Fender's Blue butterfly. Fortunately, there was a happy ending.

In January of this year, the Oregon Cascade Chronicle reported, "Over the past two decades, efforts from federal and state agencies, and agreements with private landowners to improve habitats for the butterfly, have helped it reestablish itself in the area."

Gardeners can make a difference. But just because you purchase a plant at a native plant nursery in Oregon does not necessarily mean it is a straight native. Knowing the plant's botanical name, you can do some research before you buy.

They say, a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet. Plants are much more than their latin name. They fill our senses. These sensory experiences forever fuse certain plants into our souls in personal ways. We choose plants for our gardens for many reasons. To be certain we are getting the plant we hope for, after we delight in its color, feel the texture of the leaves, and catch its scent, a gardener always reads the tag.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.