Are Those Scientific Names Really Necessary?

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When I first started hanging out around the native-plant crowd, I was more than a little intimidated by the use of scientific names for the plants. I thought, "Why are some of these people so pretentious as to use Latin names, when they know most of us in the group are doing good to know their common English names?"

It's not that I wasn't used to scientific names. I've been calling fossils by their Linnaean names for my entire adult life, but most of those fossils have no common names. If they did, then I'd use the common names around non-geologists. Why couldn't the botanists in the Native Plant Society of Texas use common names in the presence of the non-botanists, who, after all, make up most of the membership?

Now that I'm a little less ignorant about native plants, I know the people using scientific names were right, and I was wrong. So many of the commonly used names for plants are useless in trying to convey to someone else exactly which plant is under discussion.

The scientific names are useful. For example, when a birder in northern Florida identifies a pine siskin, it's the same species as the one a birder in Oregon calls a pine siskin. Neither person has to know the generic and specific names Carduelis pinus in order to be certain he is spotting the same species as the other birder.

Not so with native-plant common names. It is likely that the same species of native wildflower in West Tennessee will have a different common name than it does in East Texas. Right here in the Boerne community there are several common names for a plant I usually call thoroughwort (Ageratina havanensis according to the taxonomist splitters; Eupatorium havanense according to the lumpers). Other common names include white mist flower and boneset. However, both of those names are applied to at least one other plant in the Hill Country (Eupatorium serotinum) and to other species of Eupatorium around the state.

One of the Hill Country white mist flowers or bonesets is an excellent shrub for the yard, but the other is a little weedy looking. I would highly recommend growing A. havanensis (E. havanense) but not E. serotinum. There is a need to be specific here. (Pun intended.)

When we moved back to Central Texas about 10 years ago, I went to our nearby nursery and asked for a French mulberry. They never carried French mulberries. They told the manager that was a shame, because I had seen some French mulberries loaded with purple berries at the Cibolo Nature Center and wanted to get a plant for our yard. Mr. Froboese said, "That sounds like American beautyberry, and we do sell those." "French mulberry" might work in Louisiana or East Texas, but not in Central Texas.

There are too many common names applied to too many different species. Many times it is appropriate and even necessary to use the scientific names. Of course it may not be easy to learn those Latin names. It's especially hard when you start at it as late in life as I am trying to do.

Oh, if only I'd been this interested in native plants as a teenager. I can still remember the species names of many lizards learned when I was 16 and fossil names learned in my early twenties, but it's pretty hard to get one of those native-plant species to stick in my brain these days. Little by little, I am learning scientific names for many native plants. And I'm finding it very useful in communicating with other native-plant enthusiasts. But I have a long way to go in retaining those scientific names.

I heard of a bumper sticker that sums it up for me. If I ever find one for sale, I'll buy it. That bumper sticker reads, "So many species; so little time."