

# The Name Game



Landscape designer Franchesca Watson offers her tips on understanding all the Latin terminology used in everyday planting



*Aponogeton distachyos* (waterblommetjie): Aponogeton – apon = water; geiton = near; distachyos = having two spikes or branches

**D**o you feel daunted by the way other gardeners talk to each other in Latin? The reason they do it is that it's the only way to be accurate and know exactly which plant is being referred to. Take Jessamine, for example. This can mean the creeper *Gelsemium sempervirens* (yellow jessamine); the old favourite *Murraya paniculata* (orange jessamine), also sometimes called Mock Orange, which is also used for *Philadelphus coronarius*; *Cestrum nocturnum* (night jessamine); or simply Jasmine, which refers to the common jasmine, such as *Jasminum officinale*. If you're confused, I don't blame you. I promise that after a while, though, it becomes relatively effortless and a lot easier than the common names, which tend to confuse things. I find that knowing what the names actually mean, apart from being fascinating, helps to stick the Latin in my memory.

I was recently in France, helping with a garden, and was able to get along with the local garden contractor with only bits of French on my side, minimal English on his and a lot of Latin names and gesticulation. Here's my advice on how to learn them:

## UNDERSTAND WHAT THE TWO NAMES REPRESENT

Firstly the Genus (think of this as a surname) and then the Species (think of this as a first name) – just like our names but with the surname first. For example:

*Jasminum officinale* and *Jasminum angulare* – you can immediately see they are both from the same 'family' because they have the same 'surname' and are therefore both Jasmines, but the second part tells you exactly which kind of Jasmine.

## FAMILIARISE YOURSELF WITH THE PLANTS IN YOUR GARDEN

Try to learn one a week, and remember the first 20 are the hardest. It gets easier after that.

## DON'T BE INTIMIDATED BY THE PRONUNCIATION

Simply say the words phonetically. There is a general feeling that, because Latin is a dead language, almost anything goes.

## IT REALLY HELPS TO KNOW WHAT THE NAMES MEAN

Take *Lavandula angustifolia* – *angustifolia* means narrow-leaved, which differentiates this plant immediately from *Lavandula dentata*, meaning toothed leaves. Wild rosemary *Eriocephalus africanus* translates as African Woolly Head. *Podocarpus falcatus* – my best Yellowwood – means foot-fruit curved like a sickle. *Gazania rigens*, one of our Botterbloms, translates as rich and rigid. Interestingly *Plumbago auriculata* refers to lead (plumbum), owing to its supposed ability to cure lead poisoning, and *auriculata* refers to having ear-like appendages. *Tarchonanthus camphoratus*

(wild camphor), comes from the word *tarchos*, meaning funeral rites, probably because the leaves are burnt at funerals.

## READ USEFUL HANDBOOKS

Try *Botanical Names – What They Mean* (Friend of Silvermine Nature Area) by Deon Kesting and Hugh Clarke and *RHS Latin for Gardeners: Over 3,000 Plant Names Explained and Explored* (Mitchell Beazley) by Lorraine Harrison and the Royal Horticultural Society, both from Amazon. Don't give up – learn only one a week and you'll soon be really impressive.

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## USEFUL LATIN WORDS TO LEARN

*acacia* = thorn  
*capensis* = from the Cape Peninsula  
*stellata* = leaves arranged around the stem like a star  
*setaceus* = like a bristle  
*glauca* = covered with a bloom  
*junceus* = resembling a rush  
*officinalis* = of the apothecary's shop, also medicinal  
*australis* = of the southern hemisphere

## Other commonly used terms:

*herbaceous* = not wood forming, or low growing  
*perennial* = continues throughout the year  
*annual* = lives for one season or year