

Understanding the Nature of Plant Names

Remember that crazy game question-- “Is it animal, vegetable or mineral?” Well you can thank Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) for that distinction. He created a taxonomy system divided into three kingdoms: Regnum Animale, Regnum Vegetabile and Regnum Lapideum. We will just concern ourselves with the kingdom, Regnum Vegetabile. By-the-way, since the system began, a few life forms have been moved into three new kingdoms: Monera (bacteria); Protista (protozoans and most algae); and Fungi.

We gardeners are mostly interested in what is commonly known as the kingdom Plantae (the old Vegetable), which is divided into progressively smaller groups according to shared botanical characteristics (most commonly vascular and non-vascular.) For us, vascular is where it's at (those with roots, shoots and seeds.) Some crazy exceptions exist like mosses but that's for another day.

Many had tried to organize plants before Linnaeus but it was his system of organizing them by their sexual systems which captured and defined all plants with brilliant simplicity. Once a thing was assigned a kingdom, it was divided into classes, and then, in turn, into orders, families, genus and species, with an additional rank lower than species. Classes were based on the number of stamens and then subdivided by the number of pistils.

The greatest strength of the Linnaean system is the use of “Binomial Nomenclature”. This means that with the genus and one additional term you can uniquely identify each species of an organism within a kingdom. For example: In the kingdom of Plantae, there is the Family of Rosaceae; within that family, the Genus *Rosa*; and within that genus the species *Rosa elganteria*. (Genus is capitalized and species is lower-case, both are italicized.) So, the term *Rosa elganteria* tells us everything we need to know about this species. We know it's a rose. We know it's actually a shrub rose with prickly stems and a sweet scent. We know it has dark green leaves which are small to medium-sized and lance-shaped. We know it blooms singly or in clusters of up to seven flowers on short shoots from second year wood. That's a lot to know from just two words, but that's the beauty of the Linnaean system. And if we added a variety or a cultivar, we would know even more!

If you have questions or need additional information the Horticulture Committee and the Club's Horticulture Judges are there to help you.