

## OPEN LETTERS.

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### USE OF FERN NAMES.

WHILE Messrs. Fernald and Pollard are discussing the names by which our American ferns should be known, a few observations upon another side of the subject may be in season. I refer to the practice of fern students in the use of these names. There are in America about two thousand persons at present engaged in the study of our ferns and fern allies. Of this number I am confident that fully nine tenths are committed to what may be called a conservative nomenclature. Granted that the names given in the sixth edition of Professor Underwood's *Our Native Ferns* are correct according to the Rochester code, the mass of fern students see in this no argument for adopting them. The reason why they do not is easily found. In adopting most of the names proposed, the student would be departing from almost world-wide usage and bringing confusion into a part of the study that has thus far practically escaped. A single instance will illustrate. *Cystopteris fragilis* is a plant of almost world-wide distribution. It is found in the West Indies, South Africa, India, and Alaska, as well as the United States, and is everywhere known by the name I have here given it. The question may be fairly asked, then, what it would avail American students to unite with Professor Underwood in calling it *Filix fragilis*. They would only succeed in making themselves misunderstood to fern students in other parts of the world. On the other hand, certain changes, such as *Athyrium* for part of *Asplenium*, and *Polystichum* for part of *Aspidium*, have been readily adopted, because these names are in common use abroad, and by accepting them the American student comes more into harmony with universal usage. In thus rejecting some names and accepting others, the fern student is really consistent, although at first glance he may not seem to be.

The fact that many of our ferns are common to the old world, also, puts a slightly different aspect on the subject of their nomenclature in the opinion of the student; we cannot "go it alone" in the matter of names. And, after all, those interested in the plants themselves care very little for improvements in their names. At the same time, the value of knowing what names have been proposed for our ferns in the past is not underestimated; these names are a part of the plant's history. But the proposal to adopt them is quite another matter. Just as we have agreed not to go beyond Linnaeus for specific names, although there were such names before his day, so the fern

student prefers not to go back further for his fern names than, say, the fourth edition of Professor Underwood's book or the sixth edition of Gray's *Manual*. In doing this he is essentially adopting the brand of nomenclature advocated by Mr. Fernald, without attempting it.

I am aware that in adhering to certain names regardless of anything but common usage the student is open to the charge of being unscientific, but this does not alter the fact that he does adhere to them. Moreover, by a very few changes in his nomenclature, he can come into harmony with the great majority of students who happen to be following practically the rules suggested by Mr. Fernald, and so avoid being unscientific. The whole question resolves itself into which style of nomenclature will give us stability and uniformity *throughout the world*, with the least change. Some indication of how the tide is setting may be found in the fact that no less than three books on ferns to be issued in the United States this year will use the conservative fern names.—WILLARD N. CLUTE.



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