

# TORREYA

Vol. 37

January-February, 1937

No. 1

## Common names of common plants: Plant lore from the dictionary

GEORGE T. HASTINGS

Many, or most, of the common names of our plants came from Europe, either with the plants,—as the daisy, dandelion, and hundreds of others brought in purposely or accidentally— or given to native plants related to or resembling Old World ones.<sup>1</sup> Thus our Witch Hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*, is unrelated to European plants of the same name, one an elm, *Ulmus montana*, another a hornbeam, *Carpinus*. The name is from an Old English word, *wice* or *wic*, meaning weak; the pliant twigs of the elm were used in making bows, those of the hornbeam for divining rods. Possibly because the name has been changed to witch, magical properties have been assigned to the plant. In "Travels Throughout the Interior Parts of North America," written in 1778, supposedly by Jonathan Carver, it is stated that "The Witch Hazel . . . is possessed of the power of attracting gold and silver, and twigs of it are made use of to discover where the veins of these metals lie hid." Hemlock is an old Anglo-Saxon name for several poisonous umbelliferous plants, especially *Cicutum* and *Conium*, and given to our tree, *Tsuga*, because of a slight resemblance of the leafy twigs to the leaves of the poison hemlock, *Conium*. Mandrake is another name applied to unrelated plants on opposite sides of the Atlantic. In Mediterranean regions it is *Mandragora officinalis* of the nightshade family, here it is the May Apple, *Podophyllum pelta-*

<sup>1</sup> Most of the derivations of the names given here are from Webster's International Dictionary, others are from Murray's New English Dictionary. In the *American Botanist* Willard Clute has been publishing articles on Plant Names and their Meanings since 1919, describing chiefly scientific names, but occasionally the common names as well.



*tum* of the barberry family. The English name means man-like, from a fancied resemblance of the forked roots of the European plant to a human body. An ancient belief was that the plant had animal life and would cry out when pulled from the ground. *Arbutus*, from the Latin *arbor*, a tree, is the name of a European tree of the heath family to which our trailing arbutus, *Epigaea repens*, has a slight resemblance in its leaves.

Few of our native plants have really native names. Cohosh was the Indian name for the baneberries, *Actaea*; black snake-root, *Cimicifuga*; and blue cohosh, *Caulophyllum*. Hickory is the Indian name for a distinctly American genus of trees; it was originally pohickory. Tamarack and hackmatack are Indian names for the larches, *Larix*, of both eastern and western America. The only other tree for which we use an Indian name is the Osage orange, named for—not by—the Osage Indians in whose part of the country it grew. Kinnikinnick, used for our *Cornus Amomum*, is an Indian name meaning a mixture. It was used for a number of barks, and so for the plants they came from—smoked either alone or mixed with tobacco by the Indians. A few other Indian names will be referred to later.

Some plant names explain themselves as descriptive of the plant, its time of flowering or fruiting, or its uses. Such are coral root, corpse plant, dangleberry, Dutchman's breeches, everlasting, June berry, morning glory, evening primrose, spring beauty, and scores of others.

Other plants are named for heavenly bodies as the sunflower, the scientific name, *Helianthus*, from the Greek *Helios*, the sun; sundrops; heliotrope (*helios*, the sun and *trope*, a turning), because the plant turns to face the sun, as does the sunflower. Heliotrope was used by the Greeks for some plant different from our cultivated one which is a native of Peru and of course unknown to the ancients. But in Gray's Manual the name is said to have been given because the plant flowered at the summer solstice when the sun turns from its northern journey to the south. Moonwort (wort is Old English for root or plant) is another name for the cultivated honesty or *Lunaria* (*luna*, the moon), the silvery septum of the fruit, often used in winter bouquets, being like the full moon. Moon fern, for the *Botrychiums*, especially *B. Lunaria*, because of the crescent-shaped lobes of the frond. There are numerous star flowers, as



*Trientalis americana*; the star grass, *Hypoxis*; star of Bethlehem, *Ornithogalum umbellatum*; starwort or common chickweed, *Stellaria* (*stella*, a star); and the asters (*aster*, a star) also called starwort.

Other plants are named for animals, sometimes because of some fancied resemblance, or because eaten by the animal, but in many cases the reason for the name is lost in the distant past. All of our domestic animals have plants bearing their names. Catnip (nip from an old Dutch word *nippen*, to sip, in English becoming a drink of some intoxicant), cowbane, cow wheat, dogbane, dog berry, horse tail, horse radish, colt's foot, lamb's quarters (possibly because the plant was eaten with lamb), sheep sorrel, pigweed, hog peanut, and others. Names of wild animals are also used;—bear berry, buffalo berry, buffalo grass, deer berry, foxglove, monkey flower, moosewood, squirrel corn, wolf's bane, and others. Birds' names appear in crowfoot, goose-foot, partridge berry, pigeon berry, duckweed and hawkweed. Other animal names are found in frog bit, frog spit (for floating masses of filamentous green algae), toad flax, eel grass, pickerel weed, snake root, turtle head.

In the early days when it was taken for granted that the earth and everything in it was created solely for the use of man, if a plant was not useful for food, fiber or beauty, its virtues were considered probably to be for the cure of disease.

Excellent herbs had our fathers of old—  
 Excellent herbs to ease their pain—  
 Alexanders and Marigold,  
 Eyebright, Orris and Elecampane.

.....  
 Anything green that grew out of the mould  
 Was an excellent herb to our fathers of old.

*Our Fathers of Old*, RUDYARD KIPLING

So we have plants bearing the names of the parts of the body they were supposed to help; blood root, boneset, heart's ease, kidneywort, liverwort, lungwort, spleenwort.

Of course there are many names for which we cannot find the meanings, "Many of our plant names were hoary with age before upstart technical names were invented. In the course of time, inattentive ears and careless tongues have obscured the



original sound of many, . . . ignorance is responsible for a number of curious errors and for the bestowal of plant names on species to which they do not belong and other changes have occurred until the task of discovering the original meaning is far from easy, and in some cases quite impossible."<sup>2</sup>

In our floras and manuals there are often found "common" names that never have been, and possibly never will be, used commonly. These are often literal translations of the scientific names. When the specific name is derived from the name of a person or a region the resulting "common" name is often too clumsy for use.

A few of many names interesting because of their connection or derivation are listed alphabetically.

ADDERS TONGUE, the fern *Ophioglossum* (Greek meaning serpent's tongue), also the dog-tooth violet, *Erythronium*, supposedly from the tongue-shaped leaf. The name dog-tooth may refer to the recurved, sharp pointed perianth parts of the flower.

ALFALFA, from the Spanish, derived from the Arabic *al-fac-facah*, the best feed.

ALSIKE CLOVER, from Alsike, near Upsala in Sweden, mentioned by Linnaeus as a habitat of the plant.

AMARANTH, from a Greek word meaning unfading, because the dry calyx and bracts do not wither in drying.

ANEMONE, from the Greek, meaning daughter of the wind, because the flowers were supposed to open in the wind. This is the derivation given in the dictionaries, but in Gray's Manual the name is said to be a corruption of Náman, the Semitic name for Adonis, from whose blood the crimson-flowered anemone of the Orient was said to have sprung.

AZALEA, from the Greek, dry, because the plant will grow in dry places.

BACHELOR'S BUTTON, several species of buttercup, *Ranunculus*, with double flowers, the corn flower, *Centaurea*, and the globe amaranth, *Gomphrena*. The name given "for their similitude to the jagged cloathe buttons anciently worn in this kingdom, according to Johnson's Gerarde; but to other writers ascribed to a habit of country fellows to carry them in their pockets to divine their success with their sweethearts." Dr. Pryor.

<sup>2</sup> Willard N. Clute, Common Names of Plants, 1931.



BANE, an Old English word meaning destruction and applied to any supposedly poisonous plant, as baneberry, bugbane, cowbane, henbane, fleabane, etc.

BEARBERRY, because the bears are fond of the fruit. The generic name *Arctostaphylos* is a translation of the common name into Greek.

BEECH, Norse and Old German *böke*, *bōke*, Old English *boc*, the name of the tree in these languages. Our word book comes from these words as in ancient Saxony and Germany runes were written on thin slabs of beech wood and these made the earliest books in those lands.

BEDSTRAW, *Galium verum* was long known as Our Lady's Bedstraw. This and other species were dried and used to fill mattresses. A legend arose that the hay in the manger of Bethlehem turned into this plant with its mass of dainty flowers.

BONESET, *Eupatorium perfoliatum*, received its name because it was used as a remedy for malaria or break-bone fever. It is also called thoroughwort because the stem apparently goes through the perfoliate leaves.

BONEWORT, a name given to a number of plants because of supposed bone-healing properties. Among these plants are the ox-eye daisy, golden-rod (the Latin *Solidago* means to join or make whole), centaury, and the royal osmunda.

BUCKBEAN, *Menyanthes trifoliata*, probably a corruption of bogbean.

BUCKEYE, *Aesculus* species, because the dark brown seed resembles a deer's eye. Also called HORSECHESTNUT, probably because of the coarse nuts unfit for food,—the word horse is frequently used in this sense as in horseradish, but Webster says the nuts are said formerly to have been ground and fed to horses, while Murray quotes Gerard's Herbal, "for the people of the east countries do with the fruits thereof cure their horses of the cough . . . and such diseases."

BUCKWHEAT, from the Old English, *boc*, the beech tree, the triangular seeds resembling miniature beech nuts.

BUGBANE, *Cimicifuga*, Old English *bugge*, a hobgoblin and *bane*, to destroy. A charm made from the plant was used to drive away hobgoblins.

BUTTERCUP, *Ranunculus*, also called butterflower and golden cups, the cuckoobud of Shakespeare. In earlier writings always



written buttercups, possibly because of an idea that the yellow color of butter was due to cows eating the flowers.

CAMOMILE or CHAMOMILE, Greek *chamai melon*, earth apple, from the smell of the flower. The Latin name of the apple, *Malus*, is from the Greek *melon*.

CENTAURY, *Centaurium* species, (already mentioned under bonewort) is an old name applied by the herbalists to several plants, from *centum*, hundred and *aurum*, gold-piece, because of their supposed priceless medicinal values.

CHESTNUT, Greek *castana*, a city of Pontus, where the trees grew abundantly and whence they were introduced into Europe. Castanets were so called because they were shaped like chestnuts, or possibly pairs of chestnuts were used at first to make the clicking sound.

CLEMATIS, from the Greek *clema*, a tendril or twig. The name was used by Dioscorides for some plant with long slender branches.

COLUMBINE, from the Latin *columba*, a dove, perhaps from the spurs or nectaries being beak-like, or like doves' heads. The scientific name *Aquilegia* probably comes from *aquila*, eagle, from a resemblance of the nectaries to talons. But Drewitt<sup>3</sup> says it is derived from *aquilegus* (*aqua*, water plus *lego*, carry) and suggests that the spurs represent "five pigeons perched around something out of which they are drinking."

COWBANE, COW PARSLEY, COW PARSNIP, all poisonous umbelliferous plants. Probably the name comes from the verb *cow*, to cause fear, but it may possibly be because the plants poison cows that eat them.

CRANBERRY, because the berries ripen in spring when the cranes return, or, according to Murray, from the Gaelic *crann*, a measure of capacity for fresh herrings. The name seems to have been used by the American colonists and brought to England with the berries (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) imported as early as 1686.

DANDELION, French *dent-de-lion*, lion's tooth from the ragged teeth or lobes of the leaves.

DAISY, Old English *dayesye*, the day's eye, open in the day. The English daisy is *Bellis perennis*, our common daisy is the English ox-eye daisy.

<sup>3</sup> F. D. Drewitt, Latin Names of Common Plants, 1927.



DOGWOOD, originally *dagwood*, as dags or skewers made from it were used in roasting meat, from an old Celtic word *dag* related to dagger. It was adapted for this purpose because the hard wood did not burn easily nor give taste to the meat. But Murray says the name was given because the berries, unfit for human food, were fit only for dogs.

FESCUE GRASS, Latin *festuca*, a straw. A straw or stick used chiefly to point out letters to children learning to read.

GENTIAN, from an Illyrian king, Gentius, defeated by the Romans about 160 B.C., who was said to have discovered the tonic properties of the plant.

GERANIUM, Greek *geranos*, a crane, from the fruit like a crane's head and bill, so also called crane's bill. When L'Heritier de Brutelle divided the Linnean genus he put the cultivated geranium into the genus *Pelargonium*, Greek *pelargos*, a stork, and for the plant sometimes called stork's bill he made the genus *Erodium*, Greek *erodios*, a heron.

GILL-OVER-THE-GROUND or ground ivy, *Nepeta Hederacea*, the first part of the name from Old English Gillian, feminine of Julian. Gill came to mean a sweetheart or a flirt. Spelled Jill we have it in the nursery rhyme, Jack and Jill.

GINSENG, a Chinese word *jin-tsang*, likeness of a man. The forked root was supposed to resemble a man's body. The Chinese believe it to have extraordinary powers of curing exhaustion of body and mind.

GOOSEBERRY, a corruption of the German *krausberre*, or crisp berry. But Murray says "The grounds on which plants of fruits have received names associating them with animals are so commonly inexplicable that the want of appropriateness in the meaning affords no ground for assuming that the word is an etymological corruption, e.g. of the German *krausberre*."

HACKBERRY, a variant of hagberry, Anglo-Saxon *haga*, a fence or coppice.

HAWKWEED, *Hieracium* species, so called from an ancient belief that birds of prey used the juices of the plants to strengthen their vision.

HEAL-ALL or SELF-HEAL, *Prunella vulgaris*, was supposed to be of value in healing wounds. It was also called carpenters' weed and used especially for treating cuts made by carpenters' tools.



HOLLY, *Ilex* species, the holy tree because used for decorating churches at Christmas.

HORNBEAM, horn + beam, the latter an Anglo-Saxon word for tree. So called because the wood is as hard as horn. Both of our hornbeams, *Carpinus* and *Ostrya*, are called *ironwood*, a name given to certain trees in many parts of the world.

JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE, *Helianthus tuberosus*, was cultivated by the Indians before the coming of the white man. It reached Europe early in the seventeenth century and for some reason was given the name Girasole artichoke. The Italian *girasole*, sunflower, has been corrupted to Jerusalem.

JIMSON WEED, *Datura Stramonium*, an Asiatic weed that became naturalized near Jamestown, Virginia, and was called Jamestown weed,—but James easily became Jim.

LABRADOR TEA, species of *Ledum* used for making tea in British Columbia and Labrador during the Revolutionary war, as was NEW JERSEY TEA, *Ceanothus americanus*, further south.

LOBELIA was named for Matthew Lobel or de l'Obel, a Flemish physician to James the First. He travelled through Europe in search of plants and wrote two books describing them.

LOOSESTRIFE, Greek *lysio*, release from and *mache*, strife. Pliny says that oxen made to eat it are rendered more willing to pull together.

LOUSEWORT, *Pedicularis* species, supposed to make sheep that feed on it lousy.

LUPINE, the Latin *lupus*, wolf, indicated the plant was supposed to rob the soil of nourishment. (Apparently the Romans had no idea of the value of leguminous plants to the soil.)

MAYFLOWER, the trailing arbutus, *Epigaea repens*. In Whittier's legend it was the first flower to greet the Pilgrims at Plymouth and was named by them for their ship.

MALLOW, Greek *malakos*, soft, either because it could be used to soften water or for the soft downy leaves.

MUSTARD, Latin *mustum*, the fresh juice of grapes. Mustard was formerly prepared by mixing it with must.

NASTURTIUM, Latin *nasus*, nose, + *torquere*, torture or twist. So the nasturtium is the nose twister because of its pungent taste and odor. The name properly belongs to the water cress and related plants of the mustard family. The garden nasturtium is a South American plant of the genus *Tropaeolum*.



OXALIS, Greek *oxus*, sour, as the leaves contain oxalic acid. The acid, incidentally, gets its name from the plant. The name SORREL applied to both *Oxalis* and *Rumex Acetosella* is from the French *sur*, sour.

PENNYROYAL, *Mentha Pulegium* in Europe, *Hedeoma pulegioides* in America. A corruption of the Old English *puliall royal*, derived from the Latin *pulex*, a flea (note too the specific names of the two species). The name means good against fleas.

PRIMROSE, Latin *primus*, first, the first flower of spring. Our evening primrose, blossoming in late summer, is certainly misnamed.

RASPBERRY, Old English *raspe*, a rasp or coarse file, from the prickly stem.

SAGE, Old English *sauge*, from the Latin *salvia* (the scientific as well as the original common name of the plant) from *salvus*, saved in allusion to its reputed healing qualities.

SAMPIRE, French, l'herbe de Saint Pierre. Any species of glasswort, *Salicornia*. GLASSWORT because *Salicornia* and *Sal-sola* were burned to obtain soda ash for glass making.

SOLOMON'S SEAL, the scars on the rootstocks left by the aerial stems of past years suggest the marks made in wax with a seal or signet.

SHADBUSH, flowers when the shad are running, or going up stream to spawn. Also called JUNE BERRY because the fruit ripens in June, and SERVICE BERRY from the Old English *serves*, berries. In Europe serviceberry is the name for several species of *Pyrus*, but in America the closely related *Amelanchier*.

SQUASH, a Massachusetts Indian name, *asq*, plural *asquash*, raw or green, applied to vegetables eaten before ripe.

TEASEL, Anglo-Saxon *taesan*, to pluck or tease, because one species, *Dipsacus fullorum*, with hooked bracts was used in teasing or raising the nap on woolen cloth.

NEW YORK CITY





Hastings, George T . 1937. "Common names of common plants: Plant lore from the dictionary." *Torrey* 37(1), 1–9.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/100241>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/348800>

**Holding Institution**

New York Botanical Garden, LuEsther T. Mertz Library

**Sponsored by**

The LuEsther T Mertz Library, the New York Botanical Garden

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: Public domain. The BHL considers that this work is no longer under copyright protection.

Rights: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/permissions/>

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.