

HOW TO PRONOUNCE BOTANICAL NAMES

Many people are confused about the "correct" way to pronounce botanical names. Often people are insecure about this, and worry that they will "look stupid" if they get the name "wrong".

Relax! The good news is there is NO "correct" way to pronounce them! You may pronounce them any way you wish, and you will be just as "correct" as any Ph.D. botanist. So have confidence, and just say them however feels comfortable to you. Anyone who corrects you is only showing their own ignorance, and the correct response is to just smile and say "Yes, that's what I said, (and repeat the name as you pronounced it before)."

Scientific names are not a spoken language. Sometimes called "Latin names", this is incorrect—many biological names are based on Greek, a mix of Latin and Greek, or are based on the local name of a plant in the language of whatever people live in the area the plant was "discovered". They can be based on people's names (*Carnegie*, *Jeffersonia*, *Kennedia*), place names (*chinensis*, *californica*, *syriaca*), even anagrams (*Podranea* is just the letters of the related *Pandorea* rearranged). So we have *Lobelia Tupa*, the genus *Lobelia* named after Matthias de Lobel, and the species *Tupa* from the Mapuche Indian name of the plant in southern Chile. Nothing to do with Latin, so why use rules of Latin pronunciation on this plant? I'm sure there is a name out there that is an anagram of the name of a woman the young taxonomist was daydreaming about on the day he had to come up for a name for the species he was describing! In fact *Clitoria* is named after the supposed resemblance of the flower to certain female anatomy (that taxonomist really needed to get out more!). There is the spiny shrub called *Damnacanthus* (meaning "damn spines!") no doubt named by the taxonomist after he had stuck himself one too many times handling the specimens. Taxonomists—the guys who name these things—have a sense of humor, so let's lighten up a little ourselves.

Don't bother trying to force a botanical name to follow the rules of Latin pronunciation. Face it—we don't really know how the Romans spoke. Sure, there are good guesses based on poetry and such, but we don't have any tape recordings or first-hand accounts of Roman speech. And why should we imitate a bunch of dead guys anyway? We don't even speak modern English like Shakespeare, or modern Spanish like Cervantes. And English speakers from Boston, San Francisco, Atlanta, London, Australia, New Zealand, India, and Jamaica all sound different, so why should botanical names always sound the same?

Let me repeat—there is **ABSOLUTELY, POSITIVELY, NO** correct or official way to pronounce scientific names!

Many people have thanked us for the little pronunciation guides we give in the catalog for the genus names. But I have to tell you, they are just guides, and are in no way "correct" or "official" ways of saying them. In fact, some of them are not even how I say them myself! Why do I use them?—because they are the way a lot of people pronounce them, and how you will likely hear them.

When I am talking with others, out of courtesy I try to defer to either the senior botanist in the group, or to the botanist who is an expert in the plant we are talking about. So if there is an eighty-year old botanist in the group who says a particular name a particular way, I'll use her pronunciation when talking in her presence. If there is a specialist in some plant present, I'll use his pronunciation when talking with him. So when I'm with my friend Dan Austin, the morning glory specialist, who pronounces *Ipomoea* i-po-MOY-a, I won't call it ip-o-MAY-a. Just a courtesy, and nothing more.

As anyone who has worked with a lot of professional botanists knows, there is no agreement among them as to the correct pronunciation of names, and everyone pronounces them however they like. I've heard some eight ways of pronouncing the botanical name for thyme—*Thymus*—TEE-

mus, TYE-mus, TEE-moose, TYE-moose, THEE-mus, THYE-mus, THEE-moose, THYE-moose.

The point is to be understood, so we all know what the other person is talking about.

There are several main traditions of pronunciation—one which is used in Britain and most of the northeastern U.S., and another that is used in most of the rest of the world. Growing up here in California, with our strong Mexican influences and with Greek influence in my family, I naturally pronounced names more in line with Greek and Hispanic pronunciation. In my late teens I tortured myself trying to pronounce them the way the books said—books written by Northeastern botanists who tend to follow the British style. The rest of the world tends to look at this tradition as goofy mispronunciation. What a waste of time and effort, and I finally went back to the way that felt natural to me. I'm still unlearning some of those weird Brit pronunciations...

Here are some of the "rules" that you will run into that are just plain wrong:

"Pronounce each vowel as a syllable"—Nonsense! Forget about it! This lead to such tortured nonsense as pronouncing *williamsii* as will-ee-AM-see-eye, or *douglasii* as doug-LASS-ee-eye. Did you ever hear a Douglas Williams introduce himself as "I'm doug-LASS will-ee-AMS"? No! Williams-ee and douglas-ee are fine. And the ending "*oides*", meaning "like"—not "o-EYE-deez" but "OY-dayz" or "EE-deez". OY-dayz is more common, but I prefer EE-dayz because it is more like Greek, but I guess I'm just annoying...

"Follow the accents you find in botany books"—again, these are often that weird northeastern pronunciation, and most of the rest of the world won't understand you. Ignore them! What I do is look at the name and pronounce each root separately, just like we do with *Rhododendron*—

break it up into *rhodo* and *dendron* and say each one like its own word. After all, they are words—meaning "rose-tree". Right now I'm relearning *Pittosporum*, which most people call "pi-TOS-por-um"—I'm breaking it up into the two roots *pitto* and *sporum* meaning "pitch-seed". I'm also relearning *Acacia melanoxylon*, which most call mel-an-OX-ee-lon. That's the way I pronounced it until this year when the obvious struck me—since it is the blackwood acacia, and the name refers to the color of the wood, it is *melano* (black) and *xylon* (wood), or "me-lan-o-ZYE-lon", or "me-la-no-ZEE-lon". If the "oxy" part of the name referred to something sharp, as in *oxyacantha* (sharp-spined), then it *would* be OX-ee. But remember: **both** ways are acceptable, and neither is "correct"—both have reasonable justifications for use—one because of common usage, the other because of the roots of the word. It all comes down to personal preference.

Here are some conventions that you might find useful, or you might just like to ignore:

The "ii" at the end of words like *douglasii* already mentioned—just say it like "ee".

Say "i" like "ee", not "eye".

Say "a" like "ah", not "ay".

Say "e" like "eh", not "ee".

"Ch" is usually said like a "k", not a ch, as in *Pachycereus*—"pa-kee-seer-ee-us", but sometimes as a ch as in *Lachenalia*—"la-che-nal-ee-a".

And those family-name endings "aceae" and "ae"—Oh, no! How do I pronounce them?! Say what sounds natural to you. Professionals are all over the place on these—"ae" is pronounced "eye", "ee" or "ay", and "aceae" is pronounced "ah-say-ay", "ah-see-ee", and a whole lot of other

ways. Don't worry about it!

Generally if you just sound out the name the first time you encounter it and say it in the way that seems natural to you, you will do fine, and those scary botanical terms will become as easy as pie...

So, have confidence, don't be shy and mumble them, speak up, and say those names with conviction and a smile!