From My Garden by H.E.Bates

Are Helen of Troy and Daphne at the bottom of your garden? Our favourite novelist explains how this might be more likely than you think

Little Latin-More Greek

I recently came across two well-known writers on gardening matters separately pursuing the same fallacy about the classical names of plants. Both were making a plea for the use, wherever possible, of Latin names in addition to common names, especially in catalogues, so that as one writer put it, 'the customer can really know what he is buying.'

This immediately sent me on a small but very rewarding voyage of discovery, some results of which I will now proceed to examine so that you too, when you next pick up a catalogue, will have some idea of what you are buying. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that the voyage wasn't so much one of discovery as one of confirmation, since I was already convinced in my own mind that the notion that classical names are automatically Latin names was very, very wide of the truth. And so, in fact, it turned out to be.

Delphinium, dianthus, crocus, narcissus, lithospermum, linaria, jasminum, hyacinthus, hypericum, verbena, thalictrum—here, you might very well think is a long string of Latin-looking names, all of which you could find in any comprehensive catalogue. In fact none of them is Latin. One, *jasminum*, is Arabic, one, *verbena*, is Celtic. The rest are Greek.

Thus *delphinium* is from the Greek *delphis*, a dolphin; *dianthus* from the Greek *dius*, god, *anthos*, flower—that is to say the divine flower; *crocus* is from the Greek *krokus*, saffron, an ingredient we all know; *narcissus* is from the Greek *narkissos*, deriving from *narkao*, to stupefy, some bulbs of the genus apparently having the power to do just that, a fact that most of us probably didn't know; *lithospermum*, looking as Latin as Augustus Caesar, is nevertheless from the Greek *lithos*, a stone, and *spuma*, a seed; *hyacinthus* is from the Greek *Hyakinthos*, a Spartan youth killed by Apollo; *hypericum* is from the Greek *hyper*, over, and *ereike*, a heath; *linaria* is from the Greek *linen*, flax, hence the common name, 'toad-flax', for one of the species; *thalictrum* is from the Greek *thallo*, to become green. *Jasminum* is said to come from the Arabic name for jasmine, *ysmyn*.

This is not to say that either Greek or Latin, or both, have virtually a monopoly of plant names. *Tulipa* probably derives from the Turkish word *tulbana*, a turban, which refers to the shape of the flower; *Salix* is from the Celtic *sal*, near, and *lis*, water; *Rosa* is Celtic again, from *rhod*, meaning red; *doronicum* is from the Arabic *doronigi*.

Very many plant names, however, are commemorative and derive from no particular language, being either named after botanists of distinction or plant collectors who first discovered them. Thus *tradescantia* is named after John Tradescant, gardener to Charles I, who with his son discovered and introduced to cultivation a vast number of plants; *Davidia* owes its name to the French missionary Père David; *lobelia* is named in commemoration of Mathew Lobel, who was a physician to James I; *begonia* honours a French botanist, Michel Bégon; *fuchsia* is named after Dr Fuchs, a German botanist; *funkia* after another German, Dr Funk; *camellia*, which gives us not only its glorious red, white and pink rosettes of such chaste perfection but also, in fact, tea to drink, is named after a Moravian Jesuit Camellus, who first discovered *C. japonica* in the seventeenth century.

Nor do the origins of plant names end here. Often they derive from the shape of the flower. The flowers of *digitalis* are like fingers, or digits, hence the common name, foxgloves; *helenium* is named after Helen of Troy, the flowers having been said to have sprung from her tears; Gentius, a king of Illyria, gives his name to the *gentians*; *papaver* is possibly from *papa*, thick milk, referring to the thick juice of the poppy; *iberis* is from the old name for Spain, Iberia; legend says that *daphne* is named after Daphne who, pursued by Apollo, was rescued by being turned into a spurge laurel, which is the plant's common name; *cydonia*, so called no longer, is from an old name for a quince which grew at Cydonia, Crete; *yucca* is simply from the native Peruvian name. Some derivations are obscure and controversial, one of these being *veronica*, which may refer to St Veronica's sacred handkerchief, or may mean truly unique, or derive from Vatonica, an ancient Roman name for a Spanish province.

No, it's by no means all Latin or even all Greek, though I would be prepared to bet that Greek wins by two to one. And one day I shall explore a further field, finding out for myself why certain common plant names are the same in various languages—ie, forget-me-not in English, *ne m'oubliez pas* in French, pansy in English, *pensée* in French. As to the vernacular names for dandelion in English, French and German—well, we won't go into that just now. □□

LIVING VOL 5 NO 8 AUGUST 1971