

Plant Poets' Corner – Naming plants

A single plant can have many names throughout the world, not just varying by language but also from place to place within one country. These 'common names' can make it challenging for people working with plants to know whether they are talking about the same plant. This is why plants also have scientific names made up of a **genus** name (the group they belong to) and a **species** name (the type). For example: *Aloe vera*. *Aloe* is the genus – there are 500 species of *Aloe* – while *vera* is the species, and now we know which plant it is.

Common or scientific, names carry information about a plant – elements of its appearance, its usage or its history. In this activity, we invite you to take an imaginative leap into plant names.

1. Gathering names: Are there any plants you have more than one name for?

Try putting a plant name into Kew's Medicinal Plant Names Service or Plants of the World Online and search through the results to see what you can find. Gather a few names or facts.

2. Inventing names: Choose a plant you know. It might help to find an image of it or examine a real one if possible. What words come to mind?

Crocus: purple, white, golden, bud, bulb, spring, many, wild, gardens, joy, dew

What things could you compare it to? Think about what it feels, smells, looks or tastes like.

Crocus: gown, candle, goblet, praying hands

Try combining some of these words to give your plant some new names:

Purple dress of spring

Wild candle

Bud-goblet

Names like this are sometimes called 'kennings' – a Norse or Anglo-Saxon way of naming through combinations of words. For instance, the sea might be called 'whale-road', 'blood of the earth', 'bed of fish'.

3. **A personal touch:** Is there a person, place or story you associate with this plant? Does it mean something particular to you? If yes, invent a name or two for the plant that is personal in some way.
4. **Make a short poem:** Combine some real and invented names to create a short poem about your plant.

Learn more about naming plants from Kew



Read: An introduction to the confusing world of plant names



Read: Weird and wonderful plant names



Watch: Gwilym Lewis on plant relationships and naming



Watch: The future of taxonomy



Explore: Name and synonymy resources

