

## Latin Names

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Typically, when we are asked questions about plants, the person asking is only giving us the common name of the plant. Most people don't know the Latin name of the plant in question and this can be a problem. My suggestion to anyone purchasing a plant is to get the Latin name also so, that if questions arise later you can look for additional answers.

Many times, when we are given only the common name for a plant we can not give the person the information they are looking for because we are not positive what plant they truly have. When we get calls regarding a plant with a known Latin name we can give them the information they request such as; will it grow here, should I plant it in full sun or is it poisonous?

For example, a few years ago there were plants being sold in the county by the common name of Florida pistachio. Two of my Master Gardeners bought a "Florida pistachio" and when Carl looked up pistachio (*Pistacia vera*) in the Hortus III he found out that they have compound leaves. Carl realized that the plant he bought had simple leaves which meant that he did not have a true pistachio. Carl brought me a sample of the leaves and nuts and I sent them to the Herbarium in Gainesville for identification. The ID that came back was very surprising. It seems as though, the plant in question known as *Jatropha curcas* also called Barbados nut, is a poisonous plant BUT, there is a non-poisonous strain in Florida. The problem was that you could not look at the plant and tell if the plant was the poisonous strain or the non-poisonous strain. Now, the common name given to the plant was Florida pistachio which suggests edible nuts. My fear was that someone who owned a non-poisonous *Jatropha curcas* would go visit a friend who also had a "Florida Pistachio" and tell them that the nuts were edible. The friend might then eat their plant's nuts and be poisoned. Since you can not look at the plants and tell which ones were poisonous it would be very dangerous to eat any nuts from a plant not grown from a known non-poisonous *Jatropha curcas*. After my original article ran in the Florida Today I had another Master Gardener bring in a plant that her neighbor was given from someone at work and that plant was called "Florida coffee." Now, the problem with this plant was that it was another species of *Jatropha*, *Jatropha gossypifolia*, and there is no non-poisonous strain known for that species. So, the important message to take from this story is that if you are buying an edible plant it is extremely important to learn the Latin name just in case you want to check it further.

There are some great ways to find out more information on plants. If your question arises Monday through Friday between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. you can call us up and give us the Latin name and we will gladly help you out. If your question comes up on the weekend you can check the following websites; <http://hort.ifas.ufl.edu> which is the website for our Environmental Horticulture Department at the University of Florida. If you click on InfoCenter in the left column and then Plant Info.Databases you will come to fact sheets on both trees (palms are included) and shrubs (which includes groundcovers, perennials, etc.) You may want to check this site to see if the plants will really grow well here. (Just this May I wrote an article about plants that are sold here yet, don't necessarily grow well here.) Another website you can check for edible fruits, both deciduous and tropical,

is <http://fruitscapes.ifas.ufl.edu/> . This website will be able to tell you what cultivars do best for deciduous fruits since those need so many chilling hours to initiate flower and therefore fruit. Trying to grow a cultivar here in Brevard County, that requires 400 chilling hours like Red Delicious apples, will only result in frustration, possibly a dead plant and certainly no fruit.

Latin names are not easy to pronounce and can be difficult to spell but, if you have the name written down you will always be able to find out information on the plant. So, if you see a plant you like and are interested in buying one then, be sure to get it's Latin name!