

Did You Say the “V” Word?©

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Nursery growers and other landscape horticulture professionals never cease to amaze me by their extensive knowledge of plant botanical names. Most of us learned botanical names from an early age, perhaps hearing them from our parents, in an educational setting or, in the workplace. Both botanical and common names are a requirement for us to be fluent in our profession. Who among us has not had the temptation to rattle off a long, tongue-twisting name for someone not so well versed in botanical Latin? I have used *Ampelopsis brevipedunculata* var. *maximowiczii*. Apparently the currently accepted name of that plant is *Ampelopsis glandulosa* var. *heterophylla*. Perhaps botanical taxonomists just try to increase our vocabulary.

Plant names come easily for us as we work with plants every day. Thousands of botanical names, many with unusual sounds like *Trachelospermum*, *Eleutherococcus*, and *glyptostroboides*, roll off our tongues like water over Niagara Falls. However, there is one word that should rarely roll off our tongues. That is the word “variety”. What we mean and should say is “cultivar”.

Nursery catalogues and trade magazines are filled with plant names correctly enclosed in single quotes. Those marks denote a cultivar. However, when speaking, many professionals say variety for those names. Many respected gardening personalities on radio and television incorrectly say variety when they mean cultivar. Even some nursery catalogues, trade magazines, and promotional materials use variety when they mean cultivar.

The *International Code of Nomenclature for Cultivated Plants* (ICNCP, 2009) indicates that: (1) “the botanical categories *varietas* (var.) and *forma* (f.) are not equivalent to cultivar and these terms must not be automatically treated as equivalent terms for cultivar”, and (2) “the English words “variety,” “form,” and “strain,” or their equivalent in other languages must not be used for the word “cultivar””. Perhaps confusion arises from the fact that some national and international legislation uses variety as a legal term “to denominate a proven variant that is distinct, uniform, and stable, and is exactly equivalent to the word “cultivar” ...” (ICNCP, 2009).

Dirr (2009) describes the word variety (or subspecies) as “... individuals displaying rather marked differences in nature. The differences are inheritable and reproduce true-to-type in succeeding generations”. An example is *Cornus florida* var. *rubra*. A seedling population from a single, individual variety may have some seedlings without the parent’s unique trait. A closely related term is form (*forma*) that Dirr (2009) describes as “plant variation that occurs sporadically and randomly throughout the population of a native plant species. The trait is usually unstable (unreproducible) through sexual reproduction (seed) and must be reproduced vegetatively ...”. His example is *Lindera benzoin* f. *rubra*.

Dirr’s (2009) description of a cultivar is “an assemblage of cultivated plants which is clearly distinguished by any characters (morphological, physiological, cytological, chemical, or others) and which when reproduced (sexually or asexually) retain its distinguishing characteristic(s)”. His example is *Cercis canadensis* ‘Forest Pansy’. Cultivar names begin with a capital letter and are written within single quotes.

Varieties have their origin and exist in nature. Cultivars are variants that originate and are perpetuated in cultivation. Another way to think of the difference between a variety and a cultivar is that if the word is written within single quotes, call it a cultivar not a variety.

Literature Cited

- Dirr, M.A. 2009. Manual of Woody Landscape Plants. Stipes Publishing, Champaign, Illinois
- International Code of Nomenclature for Cultivated Plants (ICNCP). 2009. 8th ed. Intl. Soc. Hort. Sci. Scripta Hort. 10.