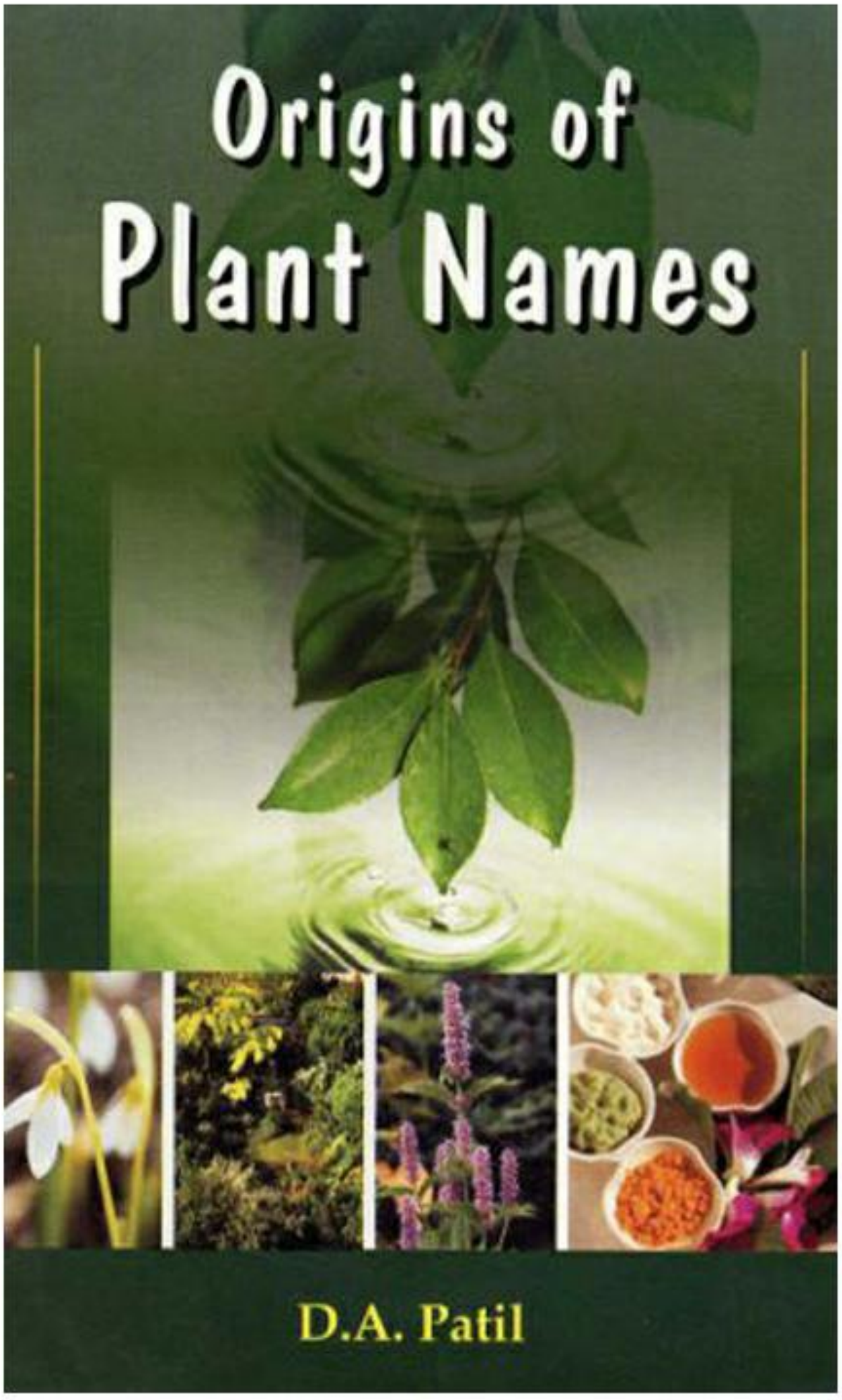
Origins of Plant Names



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Origins of
PLANT NAMES

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To
My Morther

Preface

Names of plants are scientific, methodological and latinized. It is made compulsory by International Code of Botanical Nomenclature to give names to the plants. India harbours a very large number of angiospermic plants. The sciences like Botany, Horticulture, Agriculture, Pharmacy, Pharmacognosy and few other disciplines use names of plants obviously. The plants and their names are taught at and above graduate level of studies and usually without knowing their origins, history or meanings. These names are sometimes explained in different books, treatise, monographs, research articles etc., but this information is scattered. Any one, who is interested in them, no ready reference is available to him in libraries / markets. Their zeal is thereby lost. The plants names, on etymological analysis, are found very interesting and inform on many aspects pertaining to science, human culture and civilization.

A large number of books and other literature sources have been consulted while preparing this book. It is nearly a decade—long study. I could include about **3297** generic names, apart from select **974** species names of Indian territory with their foundations. The book embodies information as: Botanical, generic / specific name, family name in parenthesis, followed by root words with the languages from which it is derived, and reasoning for giving the respective name. The plant names belongs to indigenous, exotic, cultivated or wild plants as well. They have been arranged alphabetically.

I hope this book will be useful to the undergraduate, post–graduate and even for research students, and their teachers in all Indian universities, colleges, research institutes, laboratories, apart from enthusiasts. It will be useful within India and abroad in the subject of Botany, Agriculture, Horticulture and faculty of medicines like Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani etc.

I gratefully acknowledge the advice, critical suggestions and guidance given by my Guru Dr. R. M. Pai; Ex -Head, Post–Graduate Department of Botany, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad (Maharashtra), while preparing this book. I am thankful to Dr. Hemant A. Thakur, Lecturer, Department of Botany, H.P.T. Arts and R.Y.K. Science College, Nashik (Maharashtra), for his help in typing of the manuscript. I am thankful to Dr. P.B. Bhamare, Jaihind College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Dhule (Maharashtra) and my colleagues in research Dr. Sanjay Kshirsagar (Delhi), Dr. Shashikant Shisode (Nashik, Maharashtra), Dr. Manohar Patil (Dhule, Maharashtra), Dr. Santosh Tayade (Shahada, Maharashtra), Dr. Mrs. Shubhangi Pawar (Amalner, Maharashtra) and Shrimati C.S. Nandre (Shirpur, Maharashtra) for their help in various ways for stimulating words.

Dr. D.A. Patil

Introduction

Coining of Botanical Names

Man's relation with plants dates almost with his appearance on earth. His first scientific awareness about plants was probably awakened by their medicinal properties, apart from being a source of food. He brought into cultivation plants from the wild and executed selection of better forms amongst them to his advantage which demand the beginning of agriculture. Likewise, he domesticated animals as well. One can find an element of science in this human effort. However, it was an oblivious enterprise, which over the years, steadily contributed to the systematization of the little wherewithal gained by him. Naming of plants was also one such attempt.

Thus any object, whether plant or animal, that becomes known to man possesses name. Many plants, since they used in some way or other, have common names or vernacular names. They are made up of words from the native language of the country or the region. They may vary in different countries as well as in different regions of the same country. 'Kela' and 'Gajar' of India are known as 'banana' and 'carrot' in western countries. There is, therefore, no international uniformity in vernacular or common names. A well–known plant may have hundreds of vernacular names. Sometimes, two or even more plants have same common name *e.g.* Brahmi refers to *Centella asiatica* (L.) Urban and *Bacopa monnieri* (L.) Wettstein; Rudanti refers to *Cressa cretica* L. and *Capparis mooni* Wight. Pansy (*Viola tricolor* L.) *e.g.* is grown in most European and American gardens and has about 50 common English names. In a multilingual country like India, local names differ from language to language even from dialect to dialect. The mango (*Mangifera indica* L.) in Ayurveda is known by over 50 different names, all in the Sanskrit language. Also, many species are without any local names.

To avoid such confusion, botanists use a standardized two–part system called binomial nomenclature which was pioneered by the 18th century Swedish naturalist Carolus Linnaeus. His system developed into the rules now set down in the 'International Code of Botanical Nomenclature', a set of rules to be observed and adhered to the world over in naming the plants. All plant names are latinised. The first part of a name of plant gives its genus, the group to which it belongs and with which shares many features. Rose, *e.g.* belongs to the genus *Rosa;* violet to the genus *Viola.* The second part of plant's name tells its species–the particular kind of plant in a genus. Thus *Rosa multiflora* is the scientific name for the many–flowered rose. A botanical name is often followed by an abbreviation of the name of the person who classified and named it scientifically.

Scientific plant names are precise, universal and help infer certain character details. They provide information regarding their relationships and always have only one scientific name for plant. By the name *Saccharum officinarum* L., all botanists of the world understand that it is sugarcane. Moreover, all known plants have a scientific name. They are methodical and provide means for international communication.

However, the foundations or sources of such plant names are too many. Although the method of latinization has its own merits, many–a times, this latinised coating or jacketing to the original source of the name may erase its original sense of meaning. The concepts intended while coining the names do not immediately and unequivocally call to mind.

Latin is the language of biological nomenclature. It is so agreed as at present, it is not language used by any nation and, therefore, there is no possibility of a national bias. Furthermore, lot of literature of botanical and other sciences have been written in Latin. It is found suitable for descriptive phrases of natural science. The script is, however, Roman. The use of Latin words in plant names obviates the confusion that would result if these names were written indiscriminately in other alphabets.

Routine discussions with undergraduate and post-graduate students, in the classroom and the laboratory, raised a number of inquisitive questions, which made me think over the etymology of plant names, *e.g.* (*i*) *Terminalia arjuna*: Why the name of a hero of Mahabharata is given to this tree? (*ii*) Ficus krishnae: How the name of Lord Krishna is associated with this plant? While satisfactory explanations to the students were provided, these queries generated this study of comprehending botanical names of Indian plants.

Those interested in the etymology of scientific plant names acutely face difficulty of finding a suitable source, which can adequately meet their need. In the absence of such source, one has to consult a large number of books, compendia and the like, which are time consuming. The process of collecting information thus becomes a long drawn one and akin to a task to make building out of many bricks lying scattered and often remain unnoticed.

The present inventory converses botanical names of Indian plants including the exotics. The etymology of **3297** generic names is explained; a list of specific names only about **974** select ones find a place here since inclusion of all the names may not be necessary.

Many plant names included are of recondite derivation. Yet behind their obviousness there may be fact worth explaining, which lead ones back across into antiquity.

The entries provide information in the following order: first, the botanical name, respective family name in parenthesis, root words, and then reason/s of naming are explained. The same course is followed for the names of species belonging to the genus. The source or language of origin, whether Latin, Greek, Celtic, Sanskrit or any other is mentioned in brackets before the root words whereever authenticity could be checked.

This book aims to be of service to those who wish to learn about not only the scientific names of plants of Indian region but also about their history or origin. Both kinds of names, valid and invalid, or synonyms are included so as to divulge the fuller history of naming them. The use of botanical terms has proved unavoidable.

The name may be inappropriate, yet it must stand if it has priority and satisfies the other conditions of accepted nomenclatorial practice. For example, *Duranta repens* is no repent or creeping; yet the name 'repens' holds as against *D. plumeri*. In some cases,

different names are employed for the same signification. Thus, the fact that a plant hails from China may be expressed in one case *Brassica chinensis.* Also, a geographical specific name may not indicate the natural range of distribution of a species. A plant may have been discovered in Japan and named japonica (or nipponica) and may subsequently be found to be native also in China and other countries; but the first name holds since it was described first from Japan.

Scientific plant name, far from being mystifying, give useful information about the plant, enticing us to learn more about them. Generally, they are very meaningful and not mere words of reference. The name may also be reflective of rituals, ceremonies, weapons, untensils or may be and allegory to gods, animals etc. which are induced naturally as root–words. The thoughts, knowledge, understanding and appreciation of limitless phenomena of nature have also been incorporated.

The sources of scientific names may be categorised in a number of ways. Following is brief resume of the various ways through which plants get their scientific names.

Plant Response

(*a*) ***Aeschnomene*** (Fabaceae): (Gk.) aischuno – to be ashamed; in allusion to the sensitiveness of the leaves.

(*b*) ***Mimosa*** (Mimosaceae): (Gk.) mimos – a mimic; the leaves of many species mimic animal sensibility as the leaves droop and pinnules come together on touching.

Honouring Botanists

(*a*) ***Bauhinia*** (Caesalpiniaceae): In honour of two Swiss botanists Jean Bauhin (1541–1613) of his brother Gaspart (Casper) Bauhin (1560–1624). Linnaeus remarked, "The two–lobed leaves as it were growing from the same base recalling the noble twin brothers".

(*b*) ***Bougainvillea*** (Nyctaginaceae): After Louis Antoine de Baugainville (1729–1811), an explorer and scientist, based upon the specimen collected during Bougainville's voyage around the world.

Plant Product

(*a*) ***Commiphora*** (Burseraceae): (Gk.) kommi–gum; phero–to bear; alluding to rich gum exudation from the bark.

(*b*) ***Indigofera*** (Fabaceae): (L.) indigo–a blue dyestuff, fero–to bear; most of the species produce the well known dye called 'Indigo' obtained from the leaves.

Plant Habitat

(*a*) ***Aponogeton*** (Aponogetonaceae): (Celtic) apon–water; (Gk.) gaiton–near; referring to its habitat.

(*b*) ***Dendrobium*** (Orchidaceae): (Gk.) dendron–a tree, bios–life; the species are generally found upon trees.

After Animals or their Organs

(*a*) ***Elephantopus*** (Asteraceae): (Gk.) elephantos–an elephant; pous–a foot; the radical

leaves resemble an elephant's foot.

(*b*) ***Leontis*** (Lamiaceae): (Gk.) leon–lion; ous or otis–an ear; in reference to the fancied resemblance in the corolla to a lion's ear.

Based on Colours

(*a*) ***Erythrina*** (Fabaceae): (Gk.) erythros–red; in reference to the coloured flowers of its most species.

(*b*) ***Flaveria*** (Asteraceae): (L.) flavus–yellow; referring to the plants used in dyeing as the plants give yellowish dye.

Some Miscellaneous Use

(*a*) ***Galium*** (Rubiaceae): (Gk.) gala–milk; the flowers of *G. verum* are used curdling milk.

(*b*) ***Gliricidia*** (Fabaceae): (L.) gliris–a dormouse; caedo–to kill; referring to the seeds being effective as rat and mice poison.

Based on Taste

(*a*) ***Glycyrrhiza*** (Fabaceae): (Gk.) glykos–sweet; rhiza–root; in allusion to the sweetness of the roots of the Liquorice *i.e. G. glabra*.

(*b*) ***Oxalis*** (Geraniaceae): (Gk.) oxys–acid; the leaves have an acid taste.

Derived from Local Names

(*a*) ***Pandanus*** (Pandanaceae): From Malayalam name 'Pandang" or 'Pandan' for screw–pines.

(*b*) ***Wagatea*** (Caesalpiniaceae): From a Marathi name 'Wagati'

After Shapes

(*a*) ***Pedilanthus*** (Euphorbiaceae): (Gk.) pedilon–slipper or sandal; anthos–a flower; referring to the shape of the flower.

(*b*) ***Phaseolus*** (Fabaceae): (Gk.) phaseolus–a little boat; denoting the fancied resemblance in the pods.

Based on Numerical

(*a*) ***Pentas*** (Rubiaceae): (Gk.) pantas–a series of five; referring to the floral parts always in fives.

(*b*) ***Trias*** (Orchidaceae): (Gk.) tries–growing in threes; the floral envelopes are so arranged.

After Human Organs or Parts

(*a*) ***Anacardium*** (Anacardiaceae): (Gk.) ana–like; kardia–heart; in reference to the heart–shaped fruits.

(*b*) ***Coeloglossum*** (Orchidaceae): (Gk.) koilos–hollow; glossa–tongue; referring to the lip of the orchid.

After Medicinal Properties

(*a*) ***Argemone*** (Papaveraceae): (Gk.) argemone–cataract of the eye; named from its supposed medicinal qualities.

(*b*) ***Althea*** (Malvaceae): (Gk.) althaine–to heal; referring to medicinal properties of *A. officinalis*.

Based on Celastial Bodies

(*a*) ***Helianthus*** (Asteraceae): (Gk.) helios–sun; anthos–flower; on account of brilliant colour of flowers and from the erroneous idea that the flowers always run toward the sun.

(*b*) **Menyanthes** (Gentianaceae): (Gk.) mena–cresent moon; anthos–flower; alluding to the duration of the flowers.

After Shapes of Weapons and Welfare

(*a*) ***Securigera*** (Fabaceae): (L.) securis–sword; gero–to bear; the fruits resemble a sword.

(*b*) ***Sagittaria*** (Alismaceae): (L.) sagitta–an arrow; because the leaves resemble the head of that weapon.

After Household Goods or Needs

(*a*) ***Cochlearia*** (Brassicaceae): (L.) cochlear–a spoon; the basal leaves are shaped like the spoon.

(*b*) ***Raphistemma*** (Asclepiadaceae): (Gk.) raphis–a needle; stemma–a crown; because the segments of corolla are needle–shaped.

After Odour or Smell

(*a*) ***Dysoxylum*** (Meliaceae): (Gk.) dys–bad; xylon–wood; alluding unpleasant odour of the wood.

(*b*) **O*cimum*** (Lamiaceae): (L.) ozo–to smell and 'Okimon' is an ancient Greek name for an aromatic herb coined by Theophrastus.

After Gods or Goddesses

(*a*) ***Ixora*** (Rubiaceae): After 'Iswari' name of goddess Parvati, wife of god Shiva to whom the flowers of Ixora coccinea are offered in Indian temples.

(*b*) ***Neptunia*** (Mimosaceae): After the deity 'Neptune', god of the sea in Greek mythology.

Corrupt Names

(*a*) ***Samanea*** (Mimosaceae): Samanea is a corrupt native Spanish name 'Zaman'

(*b*) ***Saraca*** (Caesalpiniaceae): Saraca is a corruption of Indian name 'Asoka'.

After Names of Towns or Cities

(*a*) ***Opuntia*** (Cactaceae): Tournefort gave this name of the town 'Opus' where cacti like plants were seen.

(*b*) ***Ougeinia*** (Fabaceae): Oojjein or Ojjayini or Ujain of Madhya Pradesh (India), traditionally the capital of Vikramaditya. It is reported that the timber of this plant

is employed in the constructions by Scindia rulers.

Names After Locality

(*a*) ***Nepenthes khasiana*** (Nepenthaceae): Khasi Hills of Meghalaya (India) have been immortalized in the species name.

(*b*) ***Moringa cocanensis*** (Moringaceae): Konkan region of the state of Maharashtra (India) finds a place in the specific name.

Anagrams

New name is coined by changing the arrangement of letter of a related taxon *e.g.*

(*a*) ***Galphimia*** (Malpighiaceae): It is an anagram of *Malpighia*, which is another closely related genus of the same family.

(*b*) ***Sadiria*** (Myrsinaceae): It is an anagram of *Ardisia* of the same family.

It will not be out of place to shed light on plant names of Indian origin. Van Rheede's 'Hortus Malabaricus' (1678–1693) is the first comprehensive treatise on natural plant wealth of Malabar region of India. The contribution of this work in the development of the scientific plant nomenclature is indeed noteworthy. It contained 791 illustrations and descriptions of 742 plants belonging to 691 modern taxa. It was one of the main sources of Linnaeus for tropical flora of Asia. Linnaeus, Adanson, Jussieau, Hamilton, de Candolle and several subsequent taxonomists have, therefore, established many genera and species based on the illustration and dsecriptions of these plants. Some of the names have later become synonyms in accordance with the rules of the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature, while many of them are still held valid. Several Malayalam (and even Tamil names) have been distorted beyond quick recognition. This happened due to the difficulty in expressing the exact Malayalam phonetics with the use of alien Roman scripts and also because of the differences in the pronunciation of the alphabet "j" in different European languages. Moreover, the words were split and only a part, or both parts of a name were utilized to coin the new generic or specific names of plants. To cite a few, are some of the following ancient Malayalam plant names:

	Malayalam Names	*Subsequent Botanical Names*
(*i*)	**Generic Names**	
	(*a*) Anona Maram	*Anona* Linn.
	(*b*) Ben Teka	*Benteca* Adans.
	(*c*) Tsjeru Cansjiram	*Consjera* Juss.
	(*d*) Tsjeria Samstravadi	*Stravadium* Juss.
	(*e*) Watta Kakakodi	*Wattakaka* Hassk.
(*ii*)	**Specific Names**	
	(*a*) Insja	*Acacia intsia* Willd.
	(*b*) Buleta kakakodi	*Echites buluttakaka* Adans.
	(*c*) Betla Codi	*Piper betle* Linn.
	(*d*) Walli Kara	*Paederia vallikara* Juss.

Subsequently, the Tamil plant names were mistaken for Malayalam ones. Samuel Brown, a surgeon of the English East India Company in Madras, regularly sent plant specimens collected from the neighborhood of Madras and Coromandel to James Petiver, Secretary of the Royal Society of London. Plukent assigned these as 'Malabar' herbarium

with ‘Malabar’ names. The names of these plants were actually Tamil names, the native language of Madras, while Malayalam was the language of Malabar. Even the script was Tamil script (Manilal, 1977).

Contents

A

Abelia (Caprifoliaceae): Named in honour of Dr. C. Abel (1780-1826), Physician to the Embassy to China under Lord Amherst.

Abelmoschus (Malvaceae): (Arabic) 'abu-l-mosk' or 'Habb-el-musk', 'father of musk'; referring to the musk-scented seeds.

Abildgardia (Cyperaceae): After Professor Christian Abildgardia (1740-1801) of Copenhagen.

Abroma (Sterculiaceae): (Gr.) a-not; broma-food; unfit to be eaten, being poisonous.

Abrus (Fabaceae): (Gk.) abros-soft; in allusion to the delicacy of the leaves.

A. fruiticulosus: (L.) frutex-a shrub; referring to shrubby habit.

A. precatorius: (L.) used for praying; seeds which are used for making rosaries.

A. pulchellus: (L.) beautiful; flowers being beautiful.

Abutilon (Malvaceae): (*i*) Ancient name of a plant analogous to the marsh mallow. (*ii*) From the Arabic name for a similar plant.
(*iii*) From the Greek term for the Mulberry, owing to the resemblance to that plant in the leaves.

Acacia (Mimosaceae): (*i*) ac-a point (in Celtic), or akazo-to sharpen or (Gk.) akis-a sharp point; many of species have thorns or prickles. (*ii*) Acacia is the name used by Pliny for the tree producing gum–Arabic or for the gum it produces.

A. auriculiformis: (L.) auricula–lobe of the ear; alluding to the twisted fruits which give appearance of the lobe of the ear.

A. caesia: (L.) caesius–bluish grey; on account of grey branches.

A. catechu: (Kannada) Katechu-extract from the heartwood.

A. concinna: (L.) concinnus-well put together, neat, elegant; on account of elegant branches.

A. farnesiana: (*i*) From the gardens of Farnese palace in Rome, or (*ii*) In honour of Farnese, a noble Italian house to which belonged one of the Popes, a Queen and several of the Princes of Parma.

A. ferruginea: (L.) ferrum-iron, rust coloured; alluding to the branches and pods.

A. intsia: (Malayalam) insia-name of the plant; corruption from Malayalam name.

A. jacquemontii: In honour of Victor Jacquemont who travelled in East Indies as a Natural Historian.

A. lantronum: (L.) of robbers, affording protection to them; because of umbrella-shaped crown which perhaps provides shelter to the robbers on their run.

A. leucophloea: (Gk.) leukos-white; because of bark colour.

*A. **nilotica***: (Arabic) from the valley of the Nile.

*A. **pennata***: (L.) penna–a feather; alluding to bipinnate leaves.

*A. **rugata***: (L.) ruga-a wrinkle; pods being wrinkled when dry.

*A. **senegal***: of Senegal in Africa; indicative of its origin.

*A. **suma***: Shami-Sanskrit name of the tree; corrupted from Sanskrit name.

*A. **tomentosa***: (L.) tomentum-densely covered with short soft tangled matted wool; alluding to the branches.

*A. **torta***: (L.) tourtus-twisted; on account of twisted pods.

Acalypha (Euphorbiaceae): (*i*) (Gk.) a-not; kallos-pleasant; aphe-touch; (*ii*) Classical name for the nettle; from the similar leaves.

*A. **hispida***: Bristly, leaves are bristly.

*A. **wilkesiana***: After Admiral Charles Wilkes (1798-1877), American explorer of the Pacific.

Acantholimon (Plumbaginaceae): (Gk.) akanthos-a spine or thorn; in allusion to the thorny limonium.

Acanthopale (Acanthaceae): (Gk.) akantha-thorn; in allusion to the thorny bracts.

Acanthopanax (Araliaceae): (Gk.) akantha-thorn; Panax-ginseng which is used for healing; alluding to its resemblance to Panax.

Acanthophoenix (Arecaceae): (Gk.) akantha-thorn; phoenix-purple; alluding to its thorny purple fruits.

Acanthophyllum (Caryophyllaceae): (Gk.) akanthos-a spine; phyllon-a leaf; alluding to the spinescent leaves.

Acanthospermum (Asteraceae): (Gk.) akantha-thorn or spine; sperma-a seed; alluding to its spiny fruits.

Acanthus (Acanthaceae): (Gk.) akanthas-a spine; some of the species being spiny.

*A. **ilicifolium***: (L.) ilex-holm oak; folium-a leaf; alluding to the leaves which resemble to those of holly *i.e.* holm oak.

Acer (Aceraceae): The word, in Latin, signifies vigorous or sharp, and comes from ac-a point (in Celtic). The name is used to designate this genus on account of the wood having formerly been much sought after for manufacturing into heads of spikes and lances.

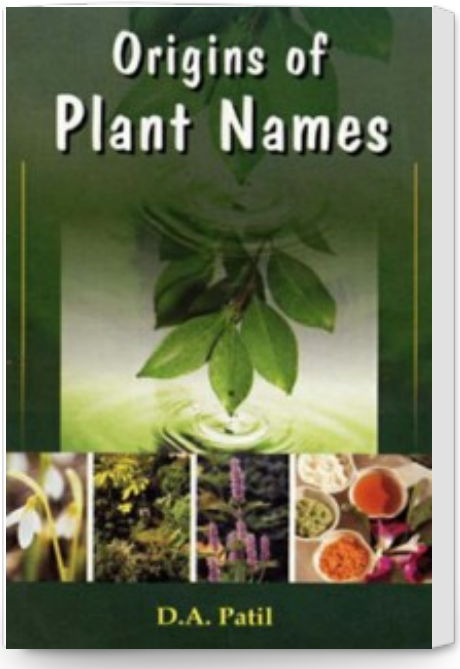
Aceras (Orchidaceae)(Gk.) a-not; keras-horn; on account of the spur being absent.

Achasma (Zingiberaceae): (Gk.) a-not; chasma-an opening or open mouth; alluding the nature of flowers.

Achillea (Asteraceae): Named after Achilles, a pupil of Chiron and the first to used the plant for healing.

Achimenes (Gesneriaceae): (Gk.) a-augmentive; chemaino-to suffer from cold or over wintering; referring to tender nature of plants.

Origin of Plant Names



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