

BOTANICAL NAMES

Part II

by R. HAWTHORN

THAT all botanical names have a meaning is often overlooked and an appreciation of this fact is a great help to understand them.

Here are some more examples of botanical and common names of plants, with brief details of what they mean.

Ranunculus bulbosus (Bulbous Buttercup): distinguished by its swollen bulb-like stem base and its leaf segment, which are close together. Most of this family are found in marshy or damp places, a likely habitat of frogs, hence *ranunculus*, from *rana*, a frog, and *bulbosus*, bulbous.

Ranunculus repens (Creeping Buttercup): a common species with large leaves which spreads quickly by leafy runners; *repens* means "creeping".

Ranunculus acris (Common Crow-foot): the tallest of the buttercups, growing to 3 ft. high. The flower stalks carry more blooms than most other types. *Acris*, sharp or bitter, indicating that the plant has an unpleasant taste.

Ranunculus ficaria (Celandine): glossy green leaves mainly heart shaped and wavy at the edges. *Ficaria*, fig-like, refers to the leaves, but Celandine may have been taken from the Greek word **chelidon** or swallow, because it was said that the greater celandine flowered when the swallows returned, and withered when they departed.

Sagina procumbens (Pearlwort): the creeping, carpeting plant found on paths and very often in close lawn turf. *Sagina*, the old name for Spurrey, originally regarded as a species of this genus, defines a fattening food. *Procumbens*, trailing or creeping, refers to the mode of growth.

Cerastium vulgatum (Mouse-ear Chickweed), with lance-like leaves akin to a mouse's ear in shape and texture, and covered with hairs, the probable derivation of its common name. *Cerastium*, from the Greek **keros** (horn), which describes the shape of the seed

capsules as they come out of the calyx. *Vulgatum* or common.

Geranium molle (Dove's foot Cranesbill): stems and leaves covered with soft white hairs, flower colours varying from red- to white-purple. *Geranium*, from the Greek word **geranos**, a crane; the fruit does resemble the head and beak of that bird, so we also get the English name Cranesbill. *Molle*, soft, possibly a reference to the softness of the foliage.

Erodium cicutarium (Common Storks-bill): The same family (natural order) as the Cranesbills, and the fruit again resembles the head and beak of a bird of the heron family. *Erodium* is from the Greek **erodius**, a heron, referring to the elongated shape of the fruit. Leaf shape has some resemblance to hemlock, or **cicuta**, the root word of *cicutarium*.

Trifolium repens (White Clover): the creeping and rooting stems of this plant are well known, as are the white flowers and the three leaflets with the pale band across them. *Trifolium*, three-leaved.

Trifolium dubium (Suckling Clover or Yellow Trefoil): this may well be the Irish Shamrock, with a darker yellow flower. Common on roadsides and sportsgrounds. *Dubium*, doubtful, but of what I do not know. Doubtful, perhaps, whether it is an Irish shamrock, a clover or a Trefoil!

Medicago lupulina (Black Medick): each leaflet ends in a tiny point to distinguish it from the trefoils. Often found sown with grasses in agriculture, being a good fodder crop. *Medicago*, sometimes explained as derived from the Greek **medike** because the Medes introduced the genus into Greece, or from *media*, the country from which alfalfa was supposed to have come. *Lupulina*, rope-like, probably referring to hope clover.

Ornithopus perpusillus (Common Birdsfoot): so named because its groups of beaked pods look like a bird's claw. *Ornithopus* from the Greek **Ornithos**, a bird, and **Pous**, foot, and *perpusillus*, very small, relating to the size of the flowers.

Lotus corniculatus (Birdsfoot Trefoil):

gay little flower with over 70 common names — lady's fingers, shoes and stockings, butter-and-eggs — so there's a good case for using one botanical name. *Lotus* was the old name adopted by Greek naturalists for a trefoil-like plant, and *corniculatus*, "horned" refers to the shape of the seed pods, often spread out like birds' toes.

Potentilla reptans (Cinquefoil): Cinquefoil, five-leaved; the botanical name *Potentilla* comes from **potens** or powerful, some species having active medicine properties. *Reptans* — creeping, a description of its stems.

Potentilla anserina (Silverweed): as before, *Potentilla* denotes the plant's use in medicine, for the treatment of ulcers and sores. Travellers also put it in their socks to make their feet more comfortable. *Anserina* comes from the Latin, **anser**, a goose, and the name may be a reminder that this grows freely on the closely grazed grass where geese have been.

Alchemilla arvenis (Parsley Piert): sometimes called Lady's Mantle. The common name refers to the shape of the leaves, which resembles a lady's cloak. *Alchemilla* is from Arabic, denoting that the plant was used in North Africa in alchemy or medicine, *arvenis* means that it is found in cultivated fields.

Galium saxatile (Heath Bedstraw): in the old days people often slept on a mattress of dried bedstraw and other plants, covered with a sheet; but the botanical name *Galium* comes from **gala**, milk, the leaves of the plant formerly being used to curdle milk. *Saxatile* means that it is found in stony places.

Taraxacum officinale (Dandelion): the name Dandelion comes from the Latin **denslionis**, meaning lion's tooth, probably relating to the shape of the leaves. *Taraxacum* is the Old Arabic name, and *officinale* comes from **officina** or chemist shop.

Crepis capillaris (Smooth Hawk-beard): of the dandelion family, with a lot of flowers massed together. *Crepis*, from the Greek **krepis**, a sandal, probably describing the shape of the leaves, and *capillaris*, hair-like, but how this description applies is hard to say.

Hypochaeris radicata (Cat's Ear): the common name refers to the bracts on the stem said to resemble cat's ears. *Hypochaeris* from the Greek **hypo**, under, and **chioros**, a pig. Pigs are supposed to eat this plant and because it has a thick, woody tap root, the word *radicata*, rooted, is brought in.

Leontodon hispidus (Common Hawkbit): *Hispidus* describes the flower head stalks; **hispid**, or covered with hairs.

Leontodon autumnalis (Autumn Hawkbit): *Autumnalis*, of the autumn, for the plant flowers from July to October.

Hieracium pilosella (Mouse-ear Hawkweed): Pliny, the Roman naturalist, believed that hawks ate this to strengthen their eyesight, so he gave it the name. *Hieracium* from **hieraz**, a hawk, *pilosella* from **pilosus**, hairy — alluding to the leaf hairs.

Senecio jacobea (Ragwort): with a lot of common names, among them Staggerwort, St James wort, Stinking Willie and Stinking Weed. Ragwort is derived from the ragged appearance of



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the leaves, *Senecio* from **senex**, old man (the hoary crown on the fruit), and *jacobeae* from St James.

Bellis perennis (Daisy): the flower heads open early in the morning and close at night, hence the name daisy-eye or Daisy. That's a pretty name, but the botanical name is even prettier. *Bellis* from the Latin **bellus** pretty, and *perennis*, always — that is, "always pretty".

Centaurea nigra (Lesser Knapweed): the name refers to healing. *Centaurea*, after the **centaur** — a mythical beast, half man and half horse, for the legendary Chiron had used this plant to heal his wounds. *Nigra*, "black", refers to the plant's involucreal fringe.

Achillea millefolium (Yarrow): Yarrow was once used to stop bleeding, to cure colds, and as a tonic. The Greek Achilles was supposed to have used this plant to heal his wounds, hence *Achillea*, and *millefolium*, a thousand leaves.

Anthemis nobilis (Chamomile): as well as being used for herb lawns, chamomile was cultivated in earlier days to make chamomile tea, drunk to aid digestion. *Anthemis*, the old Greek name for Chamomile, derived from the name for a flower, **antheon**. *Nobilis*, noble or large, refers to the flowers.

Glaux maritima (Sea Milkwort): as both its common and botanical names imply, it is a plant found near the sea, or in sea-washed turf. *Maritima*, of the sea, and *Glaux*, seagreen, describing the colour of the leaves.

Veronica arvensis (Wall Speedwell): the origin of this one is very doubtful, some think *Veronica* is a corruption of *Betonica*, the foliage of the plants being similar; **betonica** seems to be derived from a Celtic word meaning "good head" (maybe it cures hangovers!). *Arvensis*, again, a plant of cultivated fields.

Veronica serpyllifolia (Thyme-leaved Speedwell): *Veronica*, as above; *serpyllifolia*, thyme-leaved, alludes to the shape of the leaves.

Prunella vulgaris (Self-heal): a plant once thought to have medicinal properties, curing people without the help of a doctor. *Prunella* from the German **braume**, quincey, which the plant was

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supposed to cure; *vulgaris*, fairly common.

Plantago major (Broadleaved Plantain): the leaves are cooked as a green vegetable by some people. *Plantago*, from **planta**, sole of the foot; the leaves lie flat, like the sole.

Plantago media (Hoary Plantain): the common name gives the better description, for the leaves are downy; *Media* describes the size of the leaves — medium, or intermediate.

Plantago lanceolata (Ribwort): both botanical and common names are descriptive; *lanceolata*, "lance-shaped".

Plantago coronopus (Starweed; Buck's horn, Plantain): these names describe the plant well, and it is sometimes also called Star of the Earth. *Coronopus* from the Greek **korone**, a crow, and *pous*, foot, referring to the much-divided leaves.

Plantago maritima (Sea Plantain): both names speak for themselves, for the plant is found near the sea.

Armeria maritima (Thrift; Sea Pink): found on cliffs, on inland mountains, and in sandy places. Was it named Thrift because of the care it takes of any available food from the soil?

Armerixa, the old Latin name; *mari-tima* as before.

Polygonum aviculare (Knotgrass): *Polygonum* from the Greek **poly**, many, and **gonu** a small joint, referring to the many joints in the formations of the stem. *Aviculare* seems vague, for it indicates birds. Do birds particularly like knotgrass?

Rumex acetosa (Sheep's Sorrel): *Rumex*, the old Latin name for a kind of sorrel, from **rumo**, to suck (was it a habit of the Romans to suck sorrel leaves to relieve their thirst?). The leaves are acid, probably the reason for the second part of the name, *acetosa*, acid. The English name was probably suggested by the fact that these plants are found a lot in fields where sheep are pastured.

Rumex acetosella (Common Sorrel): the same as *Rumex acetosa*, meaning acid. Possibly some people might assume that these plants are regarded as acid in connection with the type of soil in which they are found, but the name would more likely indicate the taste of the leaves.

Luzula campestris (Field Woodrush): this has a lot of common names, among them Good Friday Grass. *Luzula* from the Italian **lucciola**, meaning Glow-worm. The plant has leaves fringed with white hairs, and when these are covered with dew they sparkle in the moonlight to make the botanist think of glow-worms. *Campestris*, found in plains or fields.

That more or less covers the weed and plants that will be common — at least in name — on grounds. Here now are some grasses familiar to groundsmen.

Lolium perenne (Perennial Rye-grass): cultivated in Britain for about 300 years, the old English name being Ray Grass; this was changed over the years to rye grass, and so now to rye grass. *Lolium*, the old Latin name for Darnel, and "Perennial", of course, needs no explanation.

Poa annua (Annual meadow grass): a very familiar grass and often regarded as a weed of fine turf, but some grounds would be bare if it disappeared; *Poa* is

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a botanical name for a grass, and *annua*, annual, because it is supposed to last only a year.

Poa pratensis (Smooth-stalked meadow grass): in America this is called Kentucky Bluegrass or June grass. The stalks are smooth, and the botanical name *pratensis* means "growing in a meadow".

Poa trivialis (Rough-stalked meadow grass): in America this is called rough bluegrass. The stalks are usually rough, and it is a common grass—*trivialis*, or "ordinary".

Dactylis glomerata (Cocksfoot): a weed grass of turf, the inflorescence has short-stalked compressed spikelets crowded at the ends of the branches. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that *Dactylis* means a finger, and that *glomerata* means crowded.

Cynosurus cristatus (Crested Dogstail): the seed of this grass was gathered for cultivation as far back as 1761 (not, of course, for sports grounds, but for sheep grazing). Its name refers to its inflorescence. *Cynosurus* from the Greek *kyon*, a dog, and *oura*, a tail. *Cristatus*, crested.

Hordeum murinum (wall barley): found on waste ground, and particularly by buildings and walls hence the name **hordeum**, the old Latin name for barley, and *murinum* of walls.

Agrostis stolonifera (Creeping Bent): spreads by leafy stolons. Sometimes called White Bent and Fiorin. *Agrostis* the name for a kind of grass derived from **agros**, a field, and *stolonifera*, having stolons.

Agrostis tenuis (New Zealand Brown-top): large quantities of seed are exported each season from New Zealand, the species having been taken there by settlers, who filled their mattresses with grass prior to setting sail. *Tenuis*, fine, a reference to the plant's fine leaves.

Phleum pratense (Timothy): about 1720, this grass was grown in America by Timothy Harsen, from whom its common name is derived. *Phleum* from **phylos**, the old Greek name for a marsh grass, and *pratense* a grass of meadows.



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From this, anyone would guess that Timothy could be used for winter games pitches.

Holcus lanatus (Yorkshire Fog): in America, known as "velvet grass", but is greatly reckoned to be a weed of turf. How it got the name Yorkshire Fog I do not know, but *holcus* is the old Latin name for a kind of grain and *lanatus* means "woolly", referring to the hairy leaves, or possibly to the softness or woolliness of the grass.

Anthoxanthum odoratum (Sweet Vernal): at one time included in seed mixtures for hay because of its fragrant smell. The presence of a substance called coumarin gives the plant this characteristic scent. However, it does not taste so good. *Anthoxanthum* from **anthos**, a flower, and **xanthos**, yellow; *Odoratum*, sweet-smelling.

Festuca rubra commutata (Chewing's Fescue): a Mr Chewings first sold this seed in New Zealand. Although this is considered to be one of the first grasses for turf purposes, it is interesting that *Festuca* is the old Latin name for a weedy grass (probably not much good for sheep or goats!). *Rubra*, red, describing the colour of the spikelets, and *commutata*, change or alteration. The varietal name of this grass until recent years was **Fallax**—a Latin word meaning deceitful or false, so it would suggest that it is hard to pin down!

Deschampsia flexuosa (Wavy Hair Grass): this is named after a French naturalist, Mr M. H. Deschamps; *flexuosa*, wavy, a good description of the flowering branches.

Nardus stricta (Moor Mat grass): the leaves of this species are very hard and brittle, with a lot of vegetative shoots closely packed on short rhizomes. *Nardus*, from **nardos** the Greek name of an aromatic Indian plant, and *stricta*, constricted, referring to the shoots packed together.

Incidentally, I like my own botanical name, *crataegus*. The common name Haw means hedge, referring to its use in hedgemaking.

But *crataegus* comes from the Greek **Kratos**, increasing toughness with age.

I may not be so tough as I used to be, but I like to think I am!

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