

What's in a name?

by J. (Dr. Bob) Gray

Poa pratensis L. is the Latin name for Kentucky bluegrass. It's not from Kentucky, and it is really not "blue". Not blue like the flag blue, but maybe to some a little blue in the green. The "L" at the end of the name means that it was named by none other than Linnaeus, the founding father of modern taxonomy. Taxonomy is the science that classifies plant species, species into genera, genera into families, etc. But what's in a name?

Poa is the name of a genus or group of species. It literally means "grass" in Greek. Perhaps because *Poa* is so common a grass or so representative of all grasses it was given that honor. "*Pratensis*" refers to the slender creeping rhizomes that make Kentucky bluegrass such a popular choice in lawns, golf courses and pastures. But that's a digression. Back to *Poa*. There are over 200 species in the genus *Poa* and about 65 of them are native to the United States. *Poa pratensis*, however, is thought to have originated from Europe. Maybe we should call it English Bluegrass? But I don't think so. But what do they call it over there?

Regardless, we got it right when we refer to English and Italian ryegrasses. The English ryegrass is *Lolium perenne* L. and the Italian ryegrass is *Lolium multiflorum* Lam. Lam Jean

Baptiste Pierre Antoine de Monet, Chevalier Lamarck, or Lam for short. *Lolium* is an old Latin name for darnel, which is not some high tech polyester fabric but rather an old French word for weeds.

Now not all turf type grasses, of course, come from Europe. *Zoysia japonica* you may suspect comes from Japan. It could have come just as easily from the Philippines or Korea. When species travel, they don't carry passports. The origin of the word, *Zoysia*, however, is clear. The genus was named after Karl von Zois. But I don't know who he was or why he was so honored.

Another important turf type grass is *Agrostis stoloniferous* or creeping bentgrass. The word "*Agrostis*" is also from the Greek. It refers to "agros" or the field. Modern words like agriculture, agronomy, agrarian and agrostology (the science of grasses) have agros as their origin.

The word grass itself is likely derived from the ancient Aryan (India) word ghra. It's not a big leap to more modern words like grain, green, grow and to the Latin word for grass, "gramen".

So what's in a name? If it's a name like Lamark, it could be dozens of letters! But for the name of a few key grass species, the origin of names is fun and part of the learning process. Our thanks to Dr. James Murphy, Turf Specialist, Rutgers University, for reviewing this article.

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