



RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Philological Investigation of Some English Common Plant Names

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### Manuscript Details

Manuscript Submitted : 10/05/2019  
Manuscript Revised : 09/07/2019  
Manuscript Accepted : 13/07/2019  
Manuscript Published : 15/07/2019

### Available On

<https://plantaescientia.website/ojs>

### Cite This Article As

Tayade SK & DA Patil (2019). Philological investigation of some English common plant names., *Pla. Sci.* 2019; Vol. 02 Iss. 02: 24-28. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32439/ps.v2i2.24-28>

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### ABSTRACT

This communication is aimed at scientific study of the genesis and development of common plant names as used in English language. Every human society, whether primitive or advanced has own vocabulary developed on their observations, experience, sentiments, dogmas and customs. Every human society tries to classify and name plants in his ambience and thereby mankind celebrate the biodiversity of his time. The present authors investigated total 79 plant species belonging to 78 genera and 53 families of angiosperms, one species being a gymnosperm. They divulged as many as 13 bases on which the common plant names in English are coined. They obviously reveal the richness and heritage of English people. The knowledge and wisdom of ancient will be certainly helpful for human welfare.

Keywords: English Plant names, Philology

## INTRODUCTION

Language of a community or region is developed over a long past. It has its own course of development. It is certain that it reflects the cultural status and development of the respective community. Sometimes languages also become morbid, for example, Sanskrit, Latin, Celtic, etc. It appears that their place is taken by other languages. English is one such language in the present world known to many and being used by many. This is probably because of ruling of English people over major part of the world. It is always essential to have names for objects, whether living or non-living. Members of plant world are also named by mankind.

In all languages or dialects, plants have received common name/s. In this communication, the author attempts at revealing bases of coining common plant names in English language, being a rich language. These attempts are being presented in the following. The common English plant names are freely borrowed from various botanical treatises and analyzed philologically. They are conveniently categorized and present as such: Scientific plant names (with authority), family name (in parenthesis), E.N. (English Name) followed immediately by respective analysis.

## ENUMERATION

### (I) Miscellaneous Uses

#### *Acokanthera venenata* G. Don (Apocynaceae)

E.N. Hottentot's Poison Brush, bark being a source of arrow poison.

#### *Areca catechu* L. (Arecaceae)

E.N. Betelnut Palm; nuts are chewed in India along with betel leaf and catechu.

#### *Berryo cordifolia* (Willd.) Burret (Tiliaceae)

E.N. Trincomalee Wood Tree; wood being a valuable timber.

#### *Betula papyrifera* Marsh. (Betulaceae)

E.N. Paper Birch; useful for writing paper production.

#### *Boehmeria nivea* (L.) Gaud. (Urticaceae)

E.N. Ramie of Commerce; being a source of strong fibre.

#### *Calamus rotang* L. (Arecaceae)

E.N. Rotang Rattan Palm; cane used for basket making.

#### *Catha edulis* Forsk. (Celastraceae)

E.N. Arabian Tea; tea is prepared out of leaves of the species.

#### *Ceanothus americanus* L. (Rhamnaceae)

E.N. New Jersey Tea; leaves are used as a substitute for tea.

#### *Ferula assafoetida* L. (Apiaceae)

E.N. Food of The Gods; an oleoresin obtained from roots used for flavouring.

#### *Jacquinia barbasca* (Loefl.) Mez. (Theophrastaceae)

E.N. Bracelet Wood; the shining yellow-brown seeds are made into bracelets in West Indies.

#### *Lagenaria siceraria* (Molina) Standl. (Cucurbitaceae)

E.N. Bottle Gourd; fruit when dry is used as utensils and container.

#### *Matricaria chamomilla* L. (Asteraceae)

E.N. Chamomile Tea; dried flower heads are used in making Chamomile Tea.

#### *Sesecarpus anacardium* L.f. (Anacardiaceae)

E.N. Indian Marking Nut Tree; black sap when mixed with lime water is used as a marking ink.

#### *Strychnos toxifera* Benth. (Strychnaceae)

E.N. Curare Poison Nut; South American tribes used it for arrow poison.

#### *Walsura trifolia* (A. Juss.) Harms. (Meliaceae)

E.N. Fish-Poison-Cedar; since bark is used as fish poison.

#### *Calamus rotang* L. (Arecaceae)

E.N. Rattan Cane; stems are used for making furniture.

#### *Canarium strictum* Roxb. (Burseraceae)

E.N. Black Dammar Tree; resin called 'Black Dammar' is used in manufacture of varnishes and bottling wax.

#### *Strychnos potatorum* L.f. (Strychnaceae)

### (II) Biological Observations

#### *Ravenala madagascariensis* Sonn. (Musaceae)

E.N. Traveller's Palm; (i) being an indicator of subsoil water and thus helps travellers when they are thirsty, (ii) orientation of leaves is indicative to travellers, and (iii) presence of water in cup-shaped leaf-sheaths useful for travellers.

#### *Adansonia digitata* L. (Bombacaceae)

E.N. Monkey Bread Tree; fruits are cherished by monkeys.

#### *Glossocardia boswellia* (L.f.) DC. (Asteraceae)

E.N. Rock Anethum; leaves are aromatic and look like leaves of *Anethum* (*Anethum graveolens*) but inhabit rocky places.

#### *Aldrovanda vesiculosa* L. (Droseraceae)

E.N. Water-bug trap; insectivorous plant digesting them for its own nutrition.

#### *Mimosa pudica* L. (Mimosaceae)

E.N. Sensitive plant; leaves mimic animal sensibility as the leaves droop and pinnules come closer on touching.

***Nypa fruticans* Wurbm. (Arecaceae)**

E.N. Water coconut; a palm flourishes from the tidal lagoons and streams of eastern coast.

***Pachira aquatic* Aubl. (Bombacaceae)**

E.N. Water chest-nut; this tree grows near banks of rivers and flooded localities and bears fruits which have taste like chestnut roasting.

***Euphorbia pulcherima* Willd. ex Klotzsch (Euphorbiaceae)**

E.N. The Christmas Flower; it flowers in December and a favourite gift plant and also present on Christmas greeting card.

**(III) Plant Products*****Madhuca indica* J.F. Gmel. (Sapotaceae)**

E.N. Illipe Butter Tree; since seeds yield edible oil.

***Melanorrhoea usitata* Wall. (Anacardiaceae)**

E.N. Burmese Lacquer Tree; it yields black varnish.

***Metroxylon sagu* Rottb. (Arecaceae)**

E.N. Sago Palm; pith is a source of sago starch.

***Gynocardia odorata* R.Br. (Flacourtiaceae)**

E.N. Chaulmoogra Tree; because it yields chaulmoogra oil.

***Hevea brasiliensis* (H.B.K.) Mueel.-Arg. (Euphorbiaceae)**

E.N. Para Rubber Tree; as it yields latex, a source of commercial rubber.

***Ilex vomitoria* Sol. ex Aiton (Aquifoliaceae)**

E.N. Indian Black Drink; the said drink is obtained from leaves of this species in southern part of U.S.

***Juniperus communis* L. (Cupressaceae)**

E.N. Ginopro; berries yield volatile oil used as an additive to Holland's gin for unique taste and flavour for gin.

***Abroma anusta* L. (Sterculiaceae)**

E.N. Devil's Cotton; fruits contain cottony wool but fruits are crested with irritating hairs.

***Cochlospermum religiosum* (L.) Alst. (Cochlospermaceae)**

E.N. Golden Silk Cotton; fruits contain cottony wool and plants bear golden showy flowers.

***Acacia catechu* (Linn.f.) Willd. (Mimosaceae)**

E.N. Cutch Tree; gummy extract of wood is cutch of commerce.

**(IV) Beliefs and Faith*****Geum urbanum* L. (Rosaceae)**

E.N. Blessed Herb; thought as representing the five wounds of Christ.

***Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn. (Nelumbonaceae)**

E.N. Hindu Lotus, Sacred Lotus of India; held sacred as it is associated with Goddess Lakshmi (Lotus Born)

***Nyctanthus arbor-tristis* L. (Oleaceae)**

E.N. Tree of Sadness; flowers open at night and fall off at the break of day.

***Ocimum tenuiflorum* L. (Lamiaceae)**

E.N. Holy Basil; cultivated and worshipped in Hindu homes being sacred to Lord Krishna.

***Silybum marianum* (L.) Gaertn. (Asteraceae)**

E.N. Our Lady's Thistle; white spots on the leaves are thought attributing to milk drops spread by Virgin Mary.

***Ficus religiosa* Linn. (Moraceae)**

E.N. Sacred Fig.; it belong to Fig family but is much revered in Indian region.

**(V) Appreciation of Beauty*****Gloriosa superba* L. (Liliaceae)**

E.N. Glory Lily; in reference to beautiful flowers.

**(VI) Shapes*****Canavallia gladiata* (Jacq.) DC. (Fabaceae)**

E.N. Sword Bean; pods are shaped like a sword.

***Helictress isora* L. (Sterculiaceae)**

E.N. Screw Trees; follicular fruits being twisted like screws.

***Holmskioldia saguinea* Retz. (Lamiaceae)**

E.N. Cup-Saucer Plant; corolla and calyx appear as if a cup (flower) is placed on saucer (calyx).

***Mimulus strictus* Benth. (Scrophulariaceae)**

E.N. Monkey-Flower; flower resembles face of a monkey.

***Panax quinquefolium* L. (Araliaceae)**

E.N. Ginseng (Image of a Man); its produces roots which are forked and appear like figure of man.

***Parmentiera cereifera* Seem. (Bignoniaceae)**

E.N. Panama Candle-tree; it produces fruits one meter long resembling long candles and being native of Panama.

***Averrhoa carambola* L. (Averrhoaceae)**

E.N. Star Fruit; fruits when cut transversely appear like a star.

***Cardiospermum halicacabum* L. (Sapindaceae)**

E.N. Balloon Vine; fruits are shaped like balloons and inflated due to air within.

***Echinops echinatus* Roxb. (Asteraceae)**

E.N. Globe-thistle; since flowering head are globe-like in shape.

**(VII) Birds and Animals*****Ipomoea pes-caprae* (L.) R.Br. ( Convolvulaceae)**

E.N. Goat's Foot Creeper; leaves are bilobed and appear like hoof of a goat.

***Martynia annua* L. (Martyniaceae)**

E.N. Tiger's Claw; fruits are prolonged like claws of a tiger.

***Semperrimum tectorum* L. (Crassulaceae)**

E.N. Hen-and- Chiken; numerous rosette of small leaves are produced from the main rosette leaves of the parent plant.

***Stereospermum fimbriatum* (Wall. Ex G. Don) DC (Bignoniaceae)**

E.N. Snake Tree; hanging elongate pods look like snakes.

***Celosia argentea* L. (Amaranthaceae)**

E.N. Cock's Comb; pink inflorescence stand on plants just like a comb on head of a cock.

**(VIII) Medicinal Uses*****Artemisia absinthium* L. (Asteraceae)**

E.N. Wormwood; utility of species to kill worms, a medicinal practice in Europe.

***Chenopodium ambrosoides* (L.) (Chenopodiaceae)**

E.N. Worm seed; Maya Indians of Central America used as anthelmintic.

***Euphrasia officinalis* L. (Scrophulariaceae)**

E.N. Eye Bright; because of supposed cure for blindness.

***Primula veris* L. (Primulaceae)**

E.N. Herba Paralysis; roots are useful to cure paralytic diseases.

***Cassia alata* L. (Caesalpiniaceae)**

E.N. Ringworm Shrub; leaf juice is applied to cure ringworm.

***Drypetes roxburghii* (Wall.) Hurus. (Euphorbiaceae)**

E.N. Child Life Tree; neckless made from dried fruits is placed around neck of a child to protect them from evil and diseases.

***Jatropha curcas* L. (Euphorbiaceae)**

E.N. Purging Nut; seeds have purging property and hence employed during constipation.

**(IX) Flavour*****Helichrysum italicum* (Roth) G. Don fil. (Asteraceae)**

E.N. Curry Plant; leaves having curry flavour.

***Murraya koenigii* (L.) Spern. (Rutaceae)**

E.N. Curry Leaf Tree; leaves are used in cuisine to flavour curry, curd and other vegetable preparations.

**(X) Plant Affinity*****Vitis carnosia* (Wall. Ex Wight) Gagnep. (Vitaceae)**

E.N. Fox-grape; fruits are like grapes (*Vitis vinifera*).

***Argemone mexicana* Linn. (Papaveraceae)**

E.N. Yellow Mexican Poppy; flowers and presence of latex stimulate the plant to true poppy. (*Papaver somniferum*) but has yellow flowers.

***Lodoicea maldivica* (Poir.) Pers. (Arecaceae)**

E.N. Double Coconut Palm; fruits are deeply bilobed and coconut like.

***Hygroryza aristata* (Retz.) Nees ex Wight & Arn. (Poaceae)**

E.N. Bengal Wild Rice; it is regarded relative of cultivated rice (*Oryza sativa*) and grows in Indian region.

***Asparagus racemosus* Willd. (Liliaceae)**

E.N. Wild Asparagus; indicative of wild relative species of other cultivated species of the same genus.

**(XI) Geography*****Gloriosa superba* Linn. (Liliaceae)**

E.N. Malabar Glory Lily; the name is indicative of geographical region Malabar in India.

***Garciana morella* (Gaerth.) Desr. (Clusiaceae)**

E.N. Indian Gamboge Tree; nativity of the said species is denoted in the name.

***Flacourtia indica* (Burm.f.) Merr. (Flacourtiaceae)**

E.N. Madagascar Plum; suggests that the species also grows in Madagascar Island.

**(XII) Colours*****Morus nigra* L. (Moraceae)**

E.N. Black Mulberry; berries are black.

***Styrax japonicus* Siebold & Zucc. (Styracaceae)**

E.N. Japanese Snowbell; bear dangling snow white flowers.

***Ixora coccinea* L. (Rubiaceae)**

E.N. Flame of The Wood; bright red coloured inflorescence appear prominently on green background of forest like a flame.

**(XIII) Odour and Smell*****Paederia foetida* L. (Rubiaceae)**

E.N. Stink Vine; leaves when crushed, emit offensive odour.

***Cymbopogon citrates* (DC.) Stapf. (Poaceae)**

E.N. West Indian Lemon Grass; leaves are lemon-scented especially grows in India.

***Acorus calamus* Linn. (Araceae)**

E.N. Sweet Flag; rhizome is sweet-smelling.

**DISCUSSION**

Present author and co-author systematically the genesis and development plant names in tribal dialects (Patil, 1998; Patil and Jaiswal, 2013; Pawar and Patil 1979), non-tribal languages (Patil, 2009; Patil and Patil, 2013; Dhale and Patil, 2013), a morbid language like Sanskrit (Patil, 2009, Patil, 2005; Patil and Tayade, 2014; Patil and Patil 2002) and English (Patil, 2006). We extended our investigation especially on common names for angiospermic, pteridophytic and fungal species. In this paper, we took interest in some common English plant names revealing their bases. We studied total 79 species belonging to 78 genera and 53 families. Only one taxon of it belongs to gymnosperms, while rest others are angiospermic taxa. Interestingly, the common English plant names are coined after 13 different bases such as (i) miscellaneous uses (18), (ii) biological observations (8), (iii) plant products (9), (iv) beliefs and faith (6), (v) appreciation of beauty (1), (vi) shapes (9), (vii) birds and animals (5), (viii) medicinal uses (7), (ix) flavor (2), (x) plant affinity (5), (xi) geography (3), (xii) colour (3), and (xiii) odour and smell (3). The figures in parenthesis indicate number plant species studied under the said category.

Man, ever since his appearance on the blue planet, classifies and names objects, whether biotic or abiotic, in his surroundings. It is his occupation by birth without which he cannot communicate with his fellow men and women. Obviously, he depended principally on plants in his vicinity and has intimate association with them. This has perforce led him to communicate about plants or their products. He used them for his survival and also appreciated duly on some occasions. Thus, it was his dire necessary to name plants in his own language or dialect, to which now we refer as common, local or vernacular names. Depending upon his

observations, wisdom, experience, sentiments and utilities, he endeavoured to coin names for plants in his ambience. We know, English is a rich and widely used language and has a great heritage. Present author/s studied some common English names of 79 plant species.

This is an attempt to shed more light on the philology of common English plant names. The aforesaid 13 bases of coining names clearly indicate that the then English men were well conversant with nature in general and plant world in particular. These names certainly made their communication rather easier and even conventional. Common names are generally criticized by scientific community for their restricted use. But we must appreciate them also for notable plant features, plant utility, beauty of nature, beliefs and faith of contemporary human society. They also add knowledge and past experience of our ancient. If we do not analyze and appreciate them, this knowledge will ends with time and forgotten forever. We must save this valuable treasure-trove of our ancients for our welfare.

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