Let's Talk About Pronunciation of Scientific Names

(even though James would rather not!)

by Ted C. MacRae

As botanists, most of us understand and accept the reasons for using latinized scientific names. Firstly, they offer a degree of precision and accuracy that cannot be matched by common names, no matter how much effort is put into standardizing the latter. Does "green milkweed" refer to *Asclepias viridis, Asclepias viridiflora,* or *Asclepias hirtella* (I've heard the name used in reference to all three)? Further, the use of binomials (i.e., "two names") helps to emphasize evolutionary relationships of closely related species (singular and plural) by grouping them into genera (plural of genus). Who would suspect that royal catchfly and fire pink are close relatives—a relationship that is immediately obvious when discussing *Silene regia* versus *Silene virginica*? Why, then, do many of us break out into a cold sweat when it comes to using scientific names in conversation with other botanists? Why do we offer sheepish apologies for mangling the pronunciation after attempting to use them, or abandon them altogether and resort to the more comfortable common names?

I'm here to let you in on a little-known secret—scientific names are easy to pronounce! Now, before you go out and make a mocking meme out of my words, hear me out. It is true that few of us are trained in classical Latin and that even fewer of us have attempted to systematically apply the tenets of Latin pronunciation to scientific nomenclature. Still, I'm willing to bet that few (if any) of the readers of this article would have any trouble at all pronouncing scientific names like gorilla… or rhododendron… or *Tyrannosaurus rex*!

The truth is, since Latin is a dead language, there is still considerable debate about exactly what are the rules for pronunciation (the language may have survived in written form, but there are no audio recordings of it being pronounced!). What rules that do exist have been surmised, at least in part, through study of its surviving descendants (the Romance Languages, especially Italian and Spanish). In the case of scientific names, however, we are not actually speaking Latin—we are, instead, simply utilizing *latinized* names. While it may seem desirous to pronounce those names as they would have been pronounced in Latin, the primary objective is to provide a name that always refers to a given species regardless of region or language. How the name is pronounced will, by necessity, vary among users—especially considering its use in different languages, and that is okay.

All that said, the more harmonious we can be in our pronunciation of latinized names, the more helpful this will be for those of us engaging in discussion about the species to which they refer. In that light, I offer a few helpful suggestions on "how to pronounce scientific names like a pro!" Before I do, however, let's get one thing cleared up—"Because so-and-so is an expert in such-and-such group and that's how they pronounced it" does not mean that "so-and-so's" pronunciation is correct and that any alternate pronunciation is incorrect! Even widely adopted pronunciations can be wrong, e.g. *Aloe* is most correctly pronounced "uh-LOW-ee", even though most botanists pronounce it "AL-oh" (although I have conceded to using the latter pronunciation for the common name at least). There are a few general guidelines that will help you determine the best way to pronounce nearly all the scientific names you are likely to encounter. My suggestion, after reading these guidelines, is to sound out words to yourself one syllable at a time and make them your own. If your pronunciation ends up differing from someone else's, nobody is going to think you don't know what you're talking about. In fact, the more confidence you display when saying scientific names, the more likely others are to believe you do know what you're talking about! Here are those guidelines:

-The accent is generally placed on the penultimate (next to last) syllable (e.g., *Solidago* = "so-lih-DAH-go"), except when the name ends with a double vowel, in which case it is placed on the antepenultimate (before the next to last) syllable (e.g, *quinquefolia* = "kwin-kweh-FOL-ee-uh").

-All vowels are pronounced. Most are pronounced short rather than long (e.g., math, ethics, fish, box, bus, and cyst), but there are exceptions, especially with the vowel "i" (see below).

-The dipthongs "ae" and "oe" are pronounced as a single vowel EE (e.g., *laevis* = "LEE-vis", *Ipomoea* = "ih-po-MEE-uh"). All family names end with the dipthong "ae" and are, thus, pronounced "AYE-see-ee" (e.g., La-

miaceae = "la-mee-AYE-see-ee").
--A double "ii" is pronounced "ee-ih" when occurring in the middle of a word (e.g., *artemisiifolia* = "ar-te-MEE-see-ih-FOL-ee-uh) and "ee-eye" when occurring at the end of a word (e.g., *drummondii* = "DRUM-und-ee-eye").
--"Ch" is pronounced as a hard K (e.g., *Chasmanthium* = "kas-MAN-thee-uhm").
--"G" and "c" are pronounced as hard consonants except when followed by the vowels "i", "e", or "y" or the dipthongs "ae" or "oe" (e.g., *Ajuga* = "uh-JEW-guh", *Gymnocladus* = "gym-no-CLAD-us", *coccinea* = "kock-SIN-ee-uh", *coelestinum* = "see-less-TEEN-um).

A major caveat to these general guidelines regards the pronunciation of patronymics (i.e., latinized names honoring a person or place) because the original pronunciation of the person's or place's name is always conserved, even in latinized form. For example, *Solidago gattingeri* was named after the German-born botanist Augustin Gattinger (1825–1903), whose surname was latinized by adding an "i" to the end. Were normal guidelines to be followed, the species epithet might be pronounced "guh-TIN-jur-eye". However, Augustin's surname very probably was actually pronounced "GAH-ting-er", thus, conserving that pronunciation in latinized form would result in a species epithet pronounced "GAH-ting-er-eye."

This exception for patronyms holds true even in the case of misspellings. The specific epithet of *Symphyotrichum oolentangiense* derives from the Olentangy River in Ohio (pronounced "OH-len-TAN-jee"), but the person who named the species erroneously added an extra "o" to the beginning of the species name. As annoying as it may seem, the rules of nomenclature demand that original spellings be conserved—even those that turn out to be misspellings (unless certain special conditions are met). Thus, the name cannot be corrected to *olentangiense*, and since all vowels must be pronounced the extra "o" at the beginning of the name must be pronounced in addition to the "o" at the beginning of the root "olentang". As a result, the species name is pronounced "oh-OH-len-TAN-jee-IN-see."

Okay, I will concede that not ALL scientific names are easy to pronounce!

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