

Ghosts in Your Garden?

“If you do not know the names of things,
the knowledge of them is lost, too.”

—Carl Linnaeus, *Philosophia Botanica*

Most flowers have at least two names: common and botanical. Often, a flower’s botanical name once belonged to a human being. During the heyday of international plant exploration, it became customary to honor famous botanists, naturalists, or gardeners by naming plants after them. Here are a few.

Nicotiana

French politician **Jean Nicot** (1530–1600) served as ambassador to Portugal. In

Lisbon, botanist Damião de Goes introduced him to tobacco, considered to be an effective cure-all. In 1561, Nicot sent samples to the French court. Soon, the plant was decreed to be “the queen’s herb,” and Nicot was appointed Lord of Villemain. In self-congratulatory fashion, Nicot

gave his name to the genus, a member of the nightshade family. Today, we smoke *Nicotiana tabacum* and grow several species of fragrant ornamentals—tall *N. sylvestris*, sticky *N. langsdorffii*, and night-scenting *N. alata*.



Nicotiana

by Cynthia Van Hazinga

Begonia

Frenchman **Michel Bégon** (1638–1710) was governor of Haiti and Barbados under Louis XIV. While there, Bégon became acquainted with Charles Plumier (see “*Plumeria*,” page 44) and invited him to share the bounty of his wine cellar. In return, Plumier named a tropical plant genus after Bégon. *Begonia* (family Begoniaceae) now has 1,300 species and numerous cultivars.



Begonia

Magnolia

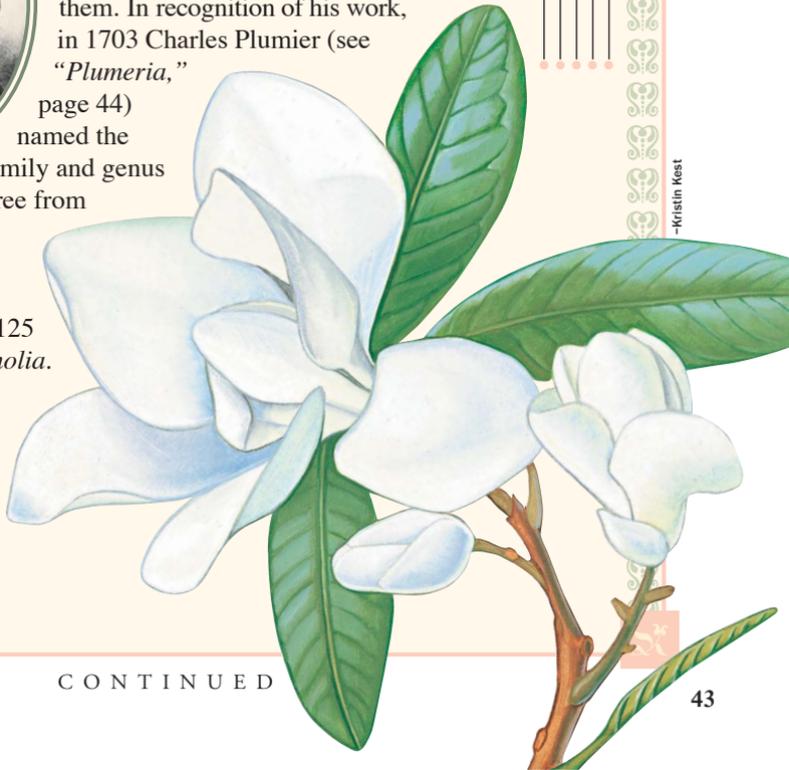
Pierre Magnol (1638–1715) was a French physician, professor of botany at the University of Montpellier, and director of the Royal Botanic Garden in an age when most cures were botanical. An expert organizer, Magnol was the first to publish the concept of plant families as we know them. In recognition of his work, in 1703 Charles Plumier (see “*Plumeria*,” page 44) named the



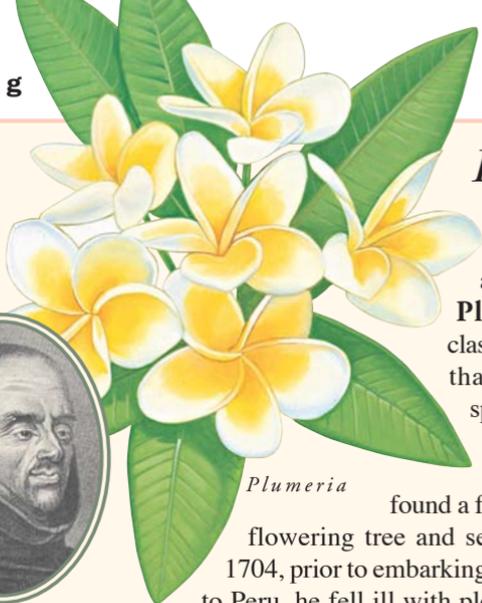
family and genus

of a flowering tree from the island of Martinique for Magnol. Today, there are about 125 species of *Magnolia*.

Magnolia



CONTINUED

*Plumeria*

Plumeria

French Franciscan monk, botanist, and explorer **Charles Plumier** (1646–1704) classified and named more than 4,300 plants after specialists of his day. On a trip to the Caribbean in the 1690s, Plumier found a fragrant, showy, white-flowering tree and sent samples home. In 1704, prior to embarking on his fourth journey, to Peru, he fell ill with pleurisy and died. Soon

after, botanists Joseph Pitton de Tournefort and Carl Linnaeus gave the genus name *Plumeria* to the tree with the five-petaled flowers from the dogbane family now also known as frangipani, Pagoda Tree, and West Indian jasmine.

Camellia

Georg Joseph Kamel (1661–1706), born in Moravia (now part of the Czech Republic), entered the Jesuit order and became a pharmacist. His superiors sent him to the Philippines, where he established a pharmacy and studied plants, lizards, and insects. Kamel sent many plant samples to Europe and became known for his ornamental herbarium. In 1735, Carl Linnaeus named a genus of evergreen flowering trees and shrubs after Kamel, using his name's feminine Latinized form, *Camellia*. Ironically, the camellia, a member of the tea family and a garden treasure in Japan and China, was unknown to Kamel.

*Camellia*

Kalmia

In the 1740s, Finnish botanist **Pehr Kalm** (1716–69) was a pupil of Carl Linnaeus. The Swedish government sent Kalm on a plant expedition to Britain's North American colonies. During forays into the



wilderness, he admired the evergreen shrub that Native Americans called spoonwood (aka mountain laurel and calico bush), which was used to make spoons and trowels. In 1751, he returned to Sweden with 90 plant species, 60 of them new. In appreciation, Linnaeus gave the name *Kalmia* to a genus of evergreen laurels that includes the mountain laurel species.



Kalmia

Gardenia

Scottish-born physician and amateur botanist **Alexander Garden** (1730–91) was brilliant and opinionated. From his indigo plantation near Charleston, South Carolina, he carried on correspondence and plant exchanges with William Bartram, Carl Linnaeus, and John Ellis, among others. When Ellis got hold of a fragrant, long-flowering, showy specimen from China, he named the genus *Gardenia*, after his friend. (This plant was actually *Gardenia jasminoides*, or Cape jasmine, which, although originally from Asia, is so called because it was first thought to have come from the Cape of Good Hope in Africa.)



Gardenia

—Kristin West



-Kristin Kest

Wisteria



Wisteria

Caspar Wistar (1761–1818), of German descent, was an amateur botanist and professor of anatomy at the University of Pennsylvania.

He also wrote the first American textbook on anatomy. Soon after the professor's death, American naturalist Thomas Nuttall named the genus of woody twining vines from the pea family for him (the misspelling, *Wisteria* instead of *Wistaria*, caused confusion for centuries).

Forsythia

Scotsman **William Forsyth** (1737–1804) served as Royal Gardener at London's Kensington and St. James's Palaces and founded the Royal Horticultural Society. He built the first rock garden in England, using lava from Iceland and 40 tons of stone from the Tower of London. Later, he invented "Forsyth's Plaister" (sic) to heal tree wounds. (A scandal erupted when the plaster was revealed to consist of cow dung, wood ashes, powdered lime,



Forsythia

and sand mixed with soapsuds and urine.) Forsyth's plant honorarium, the bushy yellow *Forsythia* (in the olive or Oleaceae family), was awarded posthumously in 1804 by Danish botanist Martin Vahl.

-The Wistar Institute, Wistar Archive Collections, Philadelphia, PA

Kerria

In 1804, wealthy British naturalist and explorer Sir Joseph Banks sent Scottish-born botanist and gardener **William Kerr** plant-hunting in China on a meager salary. Kerr succumbed to evil habits (probably opium addiction) but returned with many plants, including a shaggy-headed, orange-yellow shrub. Banks then sent Kerr to Ceylon to supervise a new botanical garden; in 1814, he died on the island. In 1818, Swiss botanist Augustin Pyramus de Candolle named the shrub *Kerria japonica* for Kerr; it is the only species in the genus *Kerria*, which is in the rose or Rosaceae family.



Kerria

Poinsettia

Gardener and amateur botanist **Joel Roberts Poinsett** (1779–1851) was the first U.S. minister to Mexico. While there in 1828, he found a shrub with large red bracts and sent cuttings to his greenhouse in South Carolina. The plant was shown at the 1829 Philadelphia Flower Show. In 1836, German botanist Karl Ludwig Willdenow found the dazzling red plant growing through a crack in his greenhouse and assigned it the botanical name *Euphorbia pulcherrima* (“the most beautiful *Euphorbia*”). In 1843, historian William Prescott was asked to give the plant a common name, and he chose to honor Joel Poinsett.



Poinsettia

A Short Tour of the Plant Kingdom

■ The accepted way of naming plants is the Latin binomial system, which follows specific rules and has been modified only slightly from Linnaeus's original. Most gardeners today are interested in only family, genus, and species, the latter two

of which are italicized when written.

Sometimes a third name in italics is present. This means that the plant is a subspecies (ssp.) or naturally growing variety (var.). An “X” indicates a hybrid, the result of crossing two genera, species, or

cultivars. A capitalized name in roman type with single quotation marks indicates a cultivar, or cultivated variety.

FAMILY: a group of one or more genera that share a set of underlying features, commonly grouped on the basis of the flower (the reproductive organ). Family names end in “aceae.”

GENUS (or type; pl. genera): a group of related species of plants; designated by

a capitalized noun, always in italics, appears before the species name.

SPECIES: the basic unit of plant classification; an adjective, always in italics, describes the plant. Species are groups of plants capable of breeding together to produce offspring similar to themselves; often, the species name will refer to its color, the shape of its leaves, or the place where it was found.

The Legendary Linnaeus

Sweden’s Carl Linnaeus (1707–78) may be the world’s most famous botanist and first plant information architect. In 1753, his book *Species Plantarum* revolutionized plant classification as well as nomenclature. His system, known as binomial classification, tagged every plant known with

two Latin words—a generic name (genus) followed by a specific qualifier (species). For example, *Helianthus annuus* (Latin for “sunflower, annual”) neatly describes the plant. Until then, plants were identified with whole phrases; in the case of the sunflower: “annual, much-branched with strongly angled, glabrous branches and leaves with saw-toothed edges.” Linnaeus held that every plant could be assigned to one of 24 classes based on its reproductive parts, the pistils (female) and stamens (male).

Linnaeus named hundreds of plants, often with humor. At his request, his own name became attached to the pan-arctic *Linnaea borealis*, or twinflower, which he described as “a plant of Lappland, lowly, insignificant, disregarded, flowering but for a brief space.” □ □



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