



PHOTO LEFT Bog Asphodel. PHOTO RIGHT Broom.



PHOTO LEFT Butterwort. PHOTO RIGHT Northern Marsh Orchid.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY ARTHUR JONES

Every time we go out for a walk, we see a variety of plants growing along our route. Some of these may be bright and colourful, others dull and insignificant-looking, some have had intriguing uses in the past, others seem to have been less useful – or perhaps knowledge of their particular properties have been lost in the mists of time.

But one property which all plants still have is a name, or in some instances several of them, and the names of the plants can be just as fascinating as their other properties.

One plant with multiple names which most of us know well as it grows prolifically on moorland is Bilberry. Or you might know it better as Blaeberry, Blueberry, Fraughan, Hurtberry, Whinberry, Wimberry or Whortleberry depending on which part of the country you live in. With eight (that I am aware of) names for the same plant, it is little wonder that botanists prefer to use the unique Latin name of *Vaccinium myrtillus* – but more on that later. Back with our common names, however, you only need to look at their prolific purple-blue fruit to understand why they are often called blueberries and as the Scots word for blue is bla, that is also easy to understand. Bilberry is possibly from the Danish 'böllebär' (dark berry) while whinberry can be explained by the fact that in a lowland environment it sometimes grows amongst gorse (which are also called whins), and probably wimberry is a variation on the same name. The Irish name of 'fraughan' comes from fraogh (gaelic for heather) amongst which it often grows on higher ground, and the 'whortle' is thought to be a corruption of myrtle (as in the Latin *myrtillus*) – a name which is still used in much of Europe.

Conversely of course, one common name can sometimes ambiguously refer to several completely different plants. One example is 'pine'; frequently misused to describe any coniferous tree –

because many of them are not pines at all but a selection of different varieties of spruce, fir or larch. The word 'pine' may come from the Latin 'piceus' – which means pitchy or resinous, and as that is a fair description of most coniferous timber, it does not take too much imagination to see how the name came into common usage.

Little wonder then that botanists realised that they had to have a system of naming plants unambiguously, whichever part of the country or the world in which they were living. This system of nomenclature was devised by the 18thC Swedish botanist, Carl Linnaeus to classify all living organisms on the planet, be they plants, animals or insects, dividing them into a hierarchical structure depending on their characteristics.

Hence the top level of the Kingdom of Plants was divided into the two divisions of flowering and non-flowering plants and then each of these was further sub-divided several more times until we end up with the bottom levels of genus (eg *Betula* (birches)) then species (e.g. *Betula pendula* (Silver Birch)). But be warned – especially with the advent of DNA analysis, taxonomists are continually changing their ideas as to which plants have similar characteristics, so Latin names are sometimes more volatile than the common names used by the rest of us.

Although conspicuously unmemorable to most of us, Latin names can have their stories as well – hence the Silver Birch mentioned above (*Betula pendula*) has pendulous, weeping branches whereas

Downy Birch (*Betula pubescens*) has downy hairs on the young shoots. Just to confuse you, they both have silvery trunks and they do hybridise as well. The Scots name for birch is 'birk' – derived from the same word as 'bark', possibly because bark was easily gathered from birches and was an extremely useful commodity for jobs as diverse as lighting fires to making small containers.

Another interesting Latin name is that for Bog Asphodel (*Narthecium ossifragum*). 'Oss' is the Latin for 'bone', while 'fragum' implied 'fragments'. It was believed that grazing on this plant was responsible for leg fractures in hill livestock. In reality the plant was merely an indicator of the soil conditions. It only grows on acid soils, which are low in lime, and consequently the animals were actually suffering from a chronic calcium deficiency, making them prone to fractured limbs.

Among the non-scientific community, plants were often named according to their use and quite a number have the suffix 'wort', which in middle English was the general word for any plant, herb or infusion of them. One of the worts which you are quite likely to encounter is butterwort, so called because it was sometimes used to curdle the milk, prior to churning it into butter. Plants like Woundwort also had a very definite function in life and though you are unlikely to come across this on the hills, you might well come across Self Heal which was similarly used to bathe wounds and promote healing. Cattle grazing on Milkwort reputedly produced higher yields of richer milk while an infusion of the same plant was given to nursing mothers, presumably in anticipation of the same effect. Bunches of Lousewort, which often grows in close proximity to Milkwort, were used to discourage infestations of lice on both humans and livestock.

One plant easily recognised by us all is the cheerful, bright yellow Dandelion which grows prolifically along paths and verges. It gets its name from the French 'Dents de Lion' – look at a dandelion leaf the next time you pass one and you'll see why. Despite the French source of the English name for this plant, the French themselves

have a completely different name for it – 'Pissons Lit' which refers, somewhat graphically, to the plant's diuretic properties; always a good story to have up your sleeve for some ribald entertainment.

The name 'Ash' is from the Anglo-Saxon 'aesc' which meant a spear or lance. Being both strong and flexible ash was the perfect material for making such weapons and in more recent times, high impact tool handles – ice-axe shafts included. I still have mine. The beautiful, pointed peak of Askival on the island of Rum derives its name from a similar source. As well as meaning 'ashwood', the Old Norse 'askr' also meant a spear – the sort of object to which marauding Vikings would have easily related when naming landmarks.

There are thirty or so varieties of orchids in the UK. Some are quite rare and inconspicuous, while others are much more widespread and can be particularly striking on the hillside in early summer. Despite their attractive appearance, their name has a somewhat earthy derivation based on a description of their root, which consists of two tubers – a bit like two tiny potatoes. The Greek word 'orchis' means a pair of testicles.

The long flexible branches of Broom were widely used to sweep floors and yards and probably gave that particular implement its name. In addition, however, herbalists in the community, often the older ladies, would make an infusion of broom tips which was used as a mild diuretic. However if they got the recipe wrong and made it too concentrated, then it was hallucinogenic and they got high on it – hence perhaps the notion of witches flying on their brooms.

If nothing else, at least they would have had an effortless ascent to the top of the hill! ■



Arthur Jones owns and runs Trossach Treks near Aberfoyle, is a qualified Mountain Leader and member of MTA. Arthur also runs *Getting to know your upland plant* workshops for fellow members as Continued Personal Development. www.trossachtreks.co.uk