

LITERACY learning springboards

Pappus

Etymology – the roots or origins of words

Explore universal plant names, the how and the why!

Many of the words in our language are borrowed or adapted from hundreds of languages around the world. Finding out about the roots of words can help spelling and reading, and geography too, if the pupils look up on a map the countries where the words originated.

- Common name: nettle
- Scientific name: *Urtica dioica*

Scientific names are commonly italicised, and sometimes known as 'Latin' names, even though not all are rooted in Latin. Nettle's scientific name is rooted in Greek:

- *Urtica* – sting (Latin)
- *dioica* – of two houses (Greek)

Binomial nomenclature



What other words can pupils think of that include 'di', meaning twice or double, in them?

- For example digraph, diverge, dioxide, dilemma and divide.

Here are some other common 'Latin' words used to describe plants

- Colour: *alba/albus* = white; *caerulea/caeruleus* = blue
- Habitat: *alpina/alpinus* = alpine; *campestris* = field
- Characteristics: *angustifolia* = narrow leaf; *fragans/fragrantissima* = scented
- Habit: *columnaris* = tall and narrow; *dentata* = toothed
- Country or area of origin: *chinensis* = China; *japonica* = Japan

Find out more with an online search for "Meaning of Latin plant names" or "binomial nomenclature guide" and check out the Pappus Plant ID sheets, which have plenty of additional information about the botany and mythology of plants.

Activity:

- Discuss the importance of accepted plant names around the world to avoid confusion (see also adjacent common plant names activity).
- From your school grounds, pick a wide selection of leaves, flowers and twigs.
- Working in small groups, pupils invent their own 'binomial' (two name) for the plant parts. Have fun with some new inventive "Latin" for example, *Leafus ginormius*, thinking carefully about what each part of the binomial actually means.
- Write each 'new' name onto a small card or post-it note.
- Display the plant parts, and collect together all the name cards. Each group should work out which new name cards belong to which plants, using their powers of binomial deduction.
- Try sending the two-word names around the class as a 'Chinese whisper' game, demonstrating how easy it is for difficult sounding words to lose their correct pronunciation.

Inventing new common names for plants

Common names of plants and why they cause confusion

Aim: Pupils find out how common names of plants came about and use their imagination to develop more names.



This activity uses the Dandelion, *Taxacum officinale*, a plant that is easily collected by pupils in the school grounds or gardens. The genus name *Taraxacum* is derived from the Greek *taraxos* (disorder), and *akos* (remedy). The *officinale* indicates that this was once an official remedy. This is the universal name for this plant, recognised around the world, but it has many 'common' names, some of which are very specific to certain geographic localities.

Activity:

Work in pairs or groups; each group has a dandelion plant to examine.

- *Leontodon* in Greek also means lion's teeth. The French 'dent-de lion' and German Löwenzahn also refers to lions' teeth. Ask pupils to take a look at the Dandelion plant and see which bits of the plant may have helped give it this common name?
- German Pusteblume "blowing flower" and Polish, dmuchawiec (derived from the verb "blow"), also refer to the well-known seed head. What other names can pupils invent that refer to the seed dispersal method of the dandelion? Could you include a local landmark or feature in the new name? This would mark the name as specific to your geographic area.
- Hungarian gyermekláncfű ("child's chain grass"), refers to making dandelion chains, like daisy chains, by linking the flowers together. If the Dandelions are abundant pupils can make their own chain bracelets at the end of the activity.

Invent common names

Extend this activity by finding other abundant plants in your grounds and inventing new common names. These invented names could then lead into poems or story writing. Discuss the importance of the accepted Latin names of plants around the world (see adjacent activity).

Key vocabulary: Etymology

Success criteria:

- ✓ I can recall and explain the Latin root word for some common plants
- ✓ I can use my knowledge and understanding of Latin names to apply it to my own plant name inventions

Resources:

- Dandelions, Pappus Dandelion ID sheet

