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# Origin of Some Common Names of Plants

compiled by Nina Curtis on behalf of

## The Tortoise Table

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**"What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet"**

William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, c. 1594

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# Origin of Plant Names

**"What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet"**

William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, c. 1594

Shakespeare's point here is that it is what you are that matters, not what you are called, and this is certainly true. However, the origins of the common and Latin names of the plants in our gardens, fields, meadows, and woods are often colourful and intriguing, reflecting customs and beliefs of our ancient heritage and honouring famous people.

This document attempts to explain the origin of the names of some of the plants that are listed on The Tortoise Table database. It is only a small sampling and doesn't attempt to be a comprehensive catalogue, but we will add entries on a regular basis, and we would welcome suggestions for additions.

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## A

**Acer** (*Acer*): This family of Maples derives its name from the Latin *acer* (sharp or pointed), and probably refers to the pointed leaves, but it could also refer to the hard wood of this tree, which Romans used to make spears.

**Agapanthus** (*Agapanthus*): Derived from the Greek *agapé* (love) and *anthos* (flower) -- the flower of love.

**Alstroemeria** (*Alstroemeria*): This plant, which is often called Peruvian Lily (because the flowers were thought to resemble Lilies), is named after its discoverer, Baron Claus von Alstromer, a Swedish baron who was an apprentice to Linnaeus, and who collected the seeds on a trip to Spain in 1753.

**Anemone** (*Anemone*): From the Greek *anemone* (daughter of the wind), and in fact one of the common names of this plant is Wind Flower. Greek legend says that *Anemos*, the Wind, sends his namesakes, the Anemones, in the earliest spring days as the heralds of his coming. Other sources claim that the flowers only opened when the wind blew.

**Antirrhinum** (*Antirrhinum*): From the ancient Greek *anti* (like) and *rhis* (nose) plus *inus* ('of' or 'pertaining to'). The name literally means "like a nose" in Ancient Greek and probably refers to the nose-like capsule in its mature state. See also \*Snapdragon\*.

**Aquilegia** (*Aquilegia*): From the Latin *aquila* (eagle). It is thought that Linnaeus chose this name because the spurs on the flowers are reminiscent of the outstretched talons of an eagle or hawk. See also \*Columbine\*.

## B

**Bear's Breeches (*Acanthus*):** Thought to come from the plant's soft hairy leaves and stalks, which were thought to resemble the rump and legs of a hairy bear.

**Beech (*Fagus*):** The origin of this name is found in early English *boc*, *bece*, or *beoce*; in German *Buche*, and in Swedish *bok*, and signifies either a book or the tree, the two meanings being connected by the fact that ancient Runic writings were engraved upon boards made from Beech trees.

**Bergamot Orange (*Citrus bergamia*):** The name Bergamot is derived from the city of Bergamo in Italy, where the oil from the fruit of this tree was first extracted and sold.

**Birch (*Betula*):** The name of this tree derives from a very old Indo-European tree word, and its root, *bherja*, refers to the fact that the birch is the 'bright' tree, a reference to its chalky-white bark.

**Black Locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*):** It is thought that the name *locust* was given to *Robinia* by Jesuit missionaries, who fancied that this was the tree that supported St John in the wilderness, but as it is native only to North America it is likely that the confusion arose because the *Robinia* resembles the carob tree, which was known as the locust tree in biblical times.

**Broccoli (*Brassica oleracea*, var. *italica*):** From the Latin *bracchium*, meaning 'strong arm' or 'branch'. This refers to the fact the the structure of Broccoli consists of many strong branches or arms that grow from the main stem, each one sprouting a sturdy budding cluster surrounded by leaves.

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## C

**Calceolaria (*Calceolaria*):** From the Latin *calceolus*, meaning small shoe, and reflecting the shape of the flower (which is commonly called Slipper Flower).

**Cat's Ear (*Hypochaeris radicata*):** Refers to the shape of the leaves and the fine hair that covers them, which are said to resemble the ear of a cat.

**Cauliflower (*Brassica oleracea*, var. *botrytisi*):** From the Latin *caulis* (cabbage) and flower.

**Celandine (*Chelidonium*):** From the Greek, *khelidon* (to swallow). Some believe that the name of the Greater Celandine (*Chelidonium majus*) might reflect the fact that it flowers around the same time that the swallows return, but others say that the origin is medieval and comes from the belief that female swallows used the plant to restore sight to their young birds if they had gone blind.

**Century Plant (*Agave*):** It was thought that this plant takes 100 years to flower (after which it dies), but in reality it only takes 10 years to flower in warm climates (60 years in colder climates). Agave was the Queen of Thebes, and *agave* in Greek means

'illustrious'. Cowboys in the American Old West called the plant 'Horse Cripplers' because of the dangerous spines on the tips of the leaves.

**Cherry** (*Prunus*): The English word *cherry* comes from the Classical Greek *kerasos* through the Latin *cerasum*, and thus the Roman town of Cerasus, on the Black Sea, from which the Cherry was first exported to Europe.

**Chrysanthemum**(*Chrysanthemum*): From the Greek, *chrysos* (gold) and *anthos* (flower).

**Clarkia** (*Clarkia*): Named after Captain William Clark of the famous Lewis and Clark expedition to the American West in 1804-1806.

**Columbine** (*Aquilegia*): From the Latin *columba* or *columbina*, meaning "dove-like", as the inverted flower is said to resemble a group of roosting doves. See also \*Aquilegia\*.

**Corncockle** (*Agrostemma githago*): So called from its regular appearance in the 'corn' fields of England, where it was an unwelcome addition because of its high degree of toxicity.

**Cowslip** (*Primula veris*): Comes from the Old English *cūslýppe* meaning 'cow dung', probably because the plant was often found growing amongst the manure in cow pastures.

**Crocsmia** (*Crocsmia*): From the Greek *krokos* (saffron) and *osme* (odour or smell), so it literally means 'smells like saffron'. Derived from the fact that when dried flowers from this plant are placed in warm water, they emit a strong smell of saffron.

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## D

**Daisy** (*Bellis perennis*): From the Old English *daeges-eaye* (day's eye), referring to the way the flowers open and close with the sun.

**Dandelion** (*Taraxacum*): A corruption of the French *dent de lion* (lion's tooth), referring to the coarsely toothed leaves.

**Delphinium** (*Delphinium*): Comes from the Greek (*delphis*) for 'dolphin' and alludes to the shape of the opening flower.

**Dianthus** (*Dianthus*): After the Greek *dios* (divine) and *anthos* (flower).

**Duke of Argyll's Tea Tree** (*Lycium barbarum*): Named after the nobleman who introduced the plant into the UK in the 1730s.

## E

**Echeveria** (*Echeveria*): Named after the 18th Century Mexican botanical artist Atanasio Echeverria y Godoy, who compiled a great inventory of the flora and fauna of his country.

**Eucalyptus** (*Eucalyptus*): From the Greek *eu* (well) and *kalyptos* (covered), meaning 'well covered', and referring to the little cap (operculum) that covers the flowers and then falls off as they open.

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## F

**Feverfew** (*Tanacetum parthenium*): Derives from the Latin *febrifugia*, meaning fever reducer.

**Forsythia** (*Forsythia*): After the 18th Century Scottish gardener, William Forsyth. Forsyth was responsible for the first British rock garden, which he built using forty tonnes of stone from the Tower of London, and lava brought back from Iceland.

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## G

**Gentian** (*Gentiana*): Said by Pliny to have been named after Gentius, a king of ancient Illyria, who discovered its properties, especially for treating digestive disorders.

**Geranium** (*Geranium/Pelargonium*): From the Greek *geranos* (a crane), and referring to the long, pointed seed pod which was thought to resemble the beak of a crane.

**Gunnera** (*Gunnera*): Named by Carl von Linnaeus in honor of Johan Ernst Gunnerus (1718-1773) who was a Norwegian Bishop of Trondheim and a botanist who wrote the *Flora norvegica* (1766-1772).

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## H

**Hawkbit** (*Leontodon*): Refers to an ancient belief that hawks ate these plants to sharpen their sight.

**Heather** (*Calluna*): This name is thought to derive from the Scottish word 'haeddre', but many variations are found dating from the 14th century. The Latin name *Calluna* is derived from the Greek word 'kallunein' which means 'to cleanse', and comes from the practice of using heather twigs as brooms, but also because the plant was used medicinally to treat a number of internal disorders.

**Hellebore** (*Helleborus*): From the Greek *elein* (to injure) and *bora* (food), indicating the poisonous nature of this plant. *Helleborus niger* is commonly called the Christmas

Rose, from an old legend that it sprouted in the snow from the tears of a young girl who had no gift to give the Christ child in Bethlehem. Some historians believe that Alexander the Great died from hellebore poisoning when he took it as medication.

**Hemlock** (*Conium maculatum*): From the Anglo-Saxon words *hem* (border, shore) and *leác* (leek or plant).

**Hogweed** (*Heracleum*): The name derives from the practice of using this weed as food for pigs.

**Holly** (*Ilex*): From the English word 'holy', and this plant has long been associated with Christmas. It is said that the pointed leaves of Holly represent the thorns of Christ's crown and are symbolic of eternal life. It is believed that when Holly was used to make the crown of thorns, the berries of the plant were yellow, but they turned to red in honour of the blood of Christ.

**Hollyhock** (*Alcea*): Thought to come from 'holy' (it was said to have been brought back to Britain by the Crusaders) plus 'hock' (because the leaves were used to reduce swelling in horses' hocks).

**Hops** (*Humulus lupulus*): From the Anglo-Saxon *hoppan*, which means 'to climb'.

**Hydrangea** (*Hydrangea*): From the Greek *hydor* (water) and *angeion* (jar or vessel). This roughly translates to 'water barrel', referring to the hydrangea's need for plenty of water and its cup-shaped flower and seed capsule.

**Hypericum** (*Hypericum*): From the Greek and meaning 'over an apparition,' a reference to the belief that the herb was so obnoxious to evil spirits that a whiff of it would cause them to fly away.

**Hyssop** (*Hyssopus officinalis*): From the Greek or Hebrew 'Azob' or 'Bzob', which means 'Holy Herb' and in ancient times was used to cleanse temples and treat leprosy.

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## J

**Joe Pye Weed** (*Eupatorium/Eutrochium purpureum*): The origin of this unusual plant name is said to refer to an 18th Century Native American medicine man called Joe Pye, who travelled throughout New England treating typhoid fever with an infusion made from this plant's leaves. The cure was successful, the herb was included in the Europeans' pharmacopoeia, and Joe Pye was thus immortalized.

**Joshua Tree** (*Yucca brevifolia*): The tree was given its name by a group of Mormon settlers who crossed the Mojave Desert in the mid-19th Century. The tree's unique shape reminded them of a Biblical story in which Joshua reaches his hands up to the sky in prayer.

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## K

**Knapweed** (*Centaurea*): The word 'knap' means 'knob' (knobweed), and probably refers to the shape of the flower. The scientific name, *Centaurea* derives from Greek mythology in which the centaur (half man-half horse) *Chiron* was said to have used the plant for its healing powers.

**Kohlrabi** (*Brassica oleracea* -- *Gongylodes* group): From the German *Kohl* (cabbage) plus *Rübe* (turnip), because the swollen stem resembles the turnip, and indeed one of the common names of this plant is 'Turnip-rooted Cabbage'.

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## L

**Lady's Bedstraw** (*Gallium verum*): So called because the dried plant was used as bedding, and myth has it that it was the hay used in the manger where Jesus was born.

**Loosestrife** (*Lysimachia*/*Lythrum*): Named for King Lysimachus, a companion of Alexander the Great. Lysimachus's name came from the Greek '*lysi machein*' (causing strife to cease), and loosestrife was often used to prevent animals that were tied up from fighting (a piece of the plant was put between them).

**Lychnis** (*Lychnis*): The Greek philosopher, Theophrastus (371-287 B.C.) is credited with giving the name *Lychnis* meaning 'lamp', after the brilliant colouring of the flowers -- especially the Rose Campion and the Maltese Cross varieties.

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## M

**Marigold** (*Calendula*): From 'Mary's Gold', as these were said to be the Virgin Mary's flowers and were often used to decorate church altars. The Latin name, *Calendula* comes from the Latin *calendae* (the first day of the month), because it bloomed every month of the year in monastery gardens and was therefore a constant source of flowers for the Church.

**Mesembryanthemum** (*Mesembryanthemum*): Originally spelled *Mesembrianthemum* from '*mesembria*' meaning 'mid-day', because the flowers only opened in the sun. However night-blooming species were discovered, so the spelling was changed and a 'y' replaced the 'i' in the middle of the word, indicating a flower with its fruit in the middle ('*mesmos*' meaning 'middle' and '*bryon*' meaning 'fruit').

**Mimulus** (*Mimulus*): *Mimulus* are often called monkey-flowers because some species have flowers shaped like a monkey's face, and others have painted faces resembling that of a monkey. The name *Mimulus* comes from the Latin *mimus* (mimic actor), and from the Greek *mimos* (imitator), and refers to this monkey 'imitation'.

**Mistletoe** (*Viscum album*; *Phoradendron leucarpum*): From the Anglo-Saxon 'mistel' (dung) and 'tan' (twig). In ancient times it was believed that Mistletoe was

propagated from bird droppings, and that life could emerge spontaneously from dung. Mistletoe would often appear on a branch or twig where birds had left droppings, so mistletoe literally means 'dung-on-a-twig'.

**Mullein** (*Verbascum*): Probably derives from the Latin *mollis* meaning 'soft', and is a reference to the leaves, which are covered in soft hairs.

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## N

**Narcissus** (*Narcissus*): Named for the youth of Greek mythology called Narcissus, who, became so obsessed with his own reflection as he kneeled and gazed into a pool of water that he fell into the water and drowned. In some variations, he died of starvation and thirst from just sitting by the edge of the pool until he gave out, gazing at his reflection until he died. In both versions, the Narcissus plant first sprang from where he died.

**Nasturtium** (*Tropaeolum*): From the Latin *nasus tortus*, meaning 'convulsed nose' or 'nose twister', and referring to the faces that people make when they eat the peppery leaves and flowers.

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## O

**Oilseed Rape** (*Brassica napus*): From the Latin *rapum* (turnip), and the fact that the seed can be used to produce an oil fit for human and animal consumption.

**Opuntia** (*Opuntia*): Refers to the Greek name used by Pliny for a number of spiny plants (not necessarily the modern-day Opuntia) which grew in the region of the village of Opus in Locria on the coast of Euboea, Greece.

**Orchid** (*Orchidaceae* family): From the Greek *orchis* (testicle), because the tubers of the Mediterranean orchids were said to resemble paired testicles of different sizes, with the smaller one storing the previous year's food.

**Osteospermum** (*Osterspermum*): From the Greek *osteon* (bone) and Latin *spermum* (seed).

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## P

**Pachyphytum** (*Pachyphytum*): From the Greek *pachys* (thick, fat) and *phyton* (plant, tree), and therefore 'fat plant', which accurately describes this lovely group of succulents with their plump, fleshy leaves.

**Pansy** (*Viola x wittrockiana/Viola tricolor hortensis*): The Pansy flower is said to resemble a face, and in Medieval France the plant was called '*pensées*', meaning 'thoughts', due to the pensive face of the flower. This was later Anglicised to 'pansy'.



**Peony/Paeony (*Paeonia*):** Thought to be derived from Paion, the physician of the gods, because of the plant's supposed healing qualities, as the root, flowers and seeds were formerly used in medicine.

**Phlox (*Phlox*):** From the Greek and Latin words for 'flame'.

**Plumbago (*Plumbago*):** From the Latin *plumbum* meaning lead, and referring to the fact that it was thought to be a cure for lead poisoning. Another common name for Plumbago is Leadwort.

**Polygonum (*Polygonum*):** From the Greek *polys* ('many') and *gony* ('knee') and refers to the shape of the stem, which is composed of many joints linked together by slightly bent 'knots' or 'knees': One of the common names for this plant is Knotweed.

**Prayer Plant (*Maranta leuconeura*):** So called because of the way its leaves fold together at night, like hands closed in prayer.

**Pulmonaria (*Pulmonaria*):** From the Latin, *pulmo* (lung), because of the considerable medical properties of the plant, which has been used since the Middle Ages to treat coughs and diseases of the chest. One of the common names is Lungwort.

**Pumpkin (*Curcubita*):** The name originated from the Greek word *pepon* (large melon). *Pepon* was changed by the French to *Pompon*, and the English changed *Pompon* to 'Pumpion'. Shakespeare referred to the 'pumpion' in his *Merry Wives of Windsor*. American colonists changed 'Pumpion' into 'Pumpkin'.

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## Q

**Queen Anne's Lace (*Daucus carota*):** From a British monarch who was adept at lace-making. The flower of the plant is indeed lace-like, and is said by some to resemble an old fashioned doily. At the centre of some white Queen Anne's Lace flower heads there is a floret that is deep red or purple rather than white, and tradition says it is a drop of blood that fell from Queen Anne's finger when she pricked it while making lace.

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## R

**Ranunculus (*Ranunculus*):** Means 'little frog', and is derived from the late Latin word *rana* (frog), with the addition of a diminutive ending. It is thought to refer to the fact that many species of this plant are found near water, like frogs.

**Rhodendron (*Rhodendron*):** From the Greek *rhodon* (rose) and *dendron* (tree) i.e. 'rose-coloured tree'.

**Rhubarb** (*Rheum*): From the Medieval Latin, *rha barbarum*. *Rha* was the name for Russia's 2,300 mile long Volga River, where the plant was first found, and *barbarum*, comes from the older sense of 'barbarous', meaning 'foreign'.

**Rosemary** (*Rosmarinus officinalis*): From the Latin *rosmarinus*, which is from *ros* (dew) and *marinus* (sea), or 'dew of the sea' — apparently so called because it is frequently found growing near the sea.

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## S

**Sainfoin** (*Onobrychis*): From Old French *sain foin* (healthy hay), as it was used to fatten livestock. The Latin name also reflects the fact that this was considered a good forage plant for large herbivores: *Onobrychis* comes from the Greek *ónos* (donkey) and *brykein* (to eat greedily).

**Sanguisorba** (Burnet): From the Latin *sanguis* (blood) and *sorbere* (to drink or absorb). Salad Burnet was commonly grown in gardens in the Middle Ages, and it was believed that the sap from the plant would stop bleeding.

**Saxifrage** (*Saxifraga*): From the Latin words *saxum* (rock or stone) and *frangere* (to break). From the plant's habit of growing in cracks in rocks -- and over time their presence in the rock causes the rock to split or break.

**Scabious** (*Scabious*): Probably associated with the word 'scab' which is derived from the Latin *scabies*, and it is thought that this plant was used as a remedy for this and similar diseases.

**Sedum** (*Sedum*): There is a difference of opinion on the origin of this name, with some people claiming it comes from the Latin *sedere* ('to sit') because of the low habit of the plant, and others claim it comes from the Latin *sedare* ('to alleviate', to 'calm') because of its supposed healing properties. There is some evidence to support the latter claim as Pliny (Gaius Plinius Secundus, a scientist from Pompeii who died in the 79 A.D. eruption of Mt. Vesuvius) listed many conditions that it could cure (bladder problems, shingles and cancerous and rotting abscesses).

**Sempervivum** (*Sempervivum*): From the Latin *semper* ('forever' or 'always') and *vivo* ('live') -- therefore a plant that lives forever, or is always alive. The name probably stems from the fact that these plants don't lose their leaves in winter and are very resistant to low temperatures. It also describes the practice of sending off plantlets or offsets in a circle around the original plant, ensuring that it perpetuates itself (hence one of the common names of Hens and Chicks). Another common name is Houseleek, referring to the fact that some members of this genus traditionally grow on the thatched roofs of houses in Europe.

**Shepherd's Purse** (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*): So named because its triangular seed pods bore a resemblance to an old-fashioned leather purse. The Irish name for this plant, 'Clappedepouch' was an allusion to the begging of lepers, who stood at cross-roads with a bell or clapper, receiving their alms in a cup at the end of a long pole.

**Snapdragon** (*Antirrhinum*): From the flower's supposed resemblance to the face of a dragon that opens and closes its mouth when laterally squeezed (thus the 'snap'). See also \*Antirrhinum\*.

**Speedwell** (*Veronica officinalis*): Comes from an archaic meaning of the word speed, 'to thrive'.

**Squash** (*Curcubita*): From 'askutasquash', which literally means 'a green thing eaten raw' in the language of the Nahahiganseck Native American tribe who inhabited the North-eastern USA.

**Staghorn Sumac** (*Rhus typhina*): The name "staghorn" is derived from the appearance of the tree after its beautiful red, purple and yellow leaves fall in the Autumn, revealing velvety branches resembling the antlers of a stag.

**Sweet Woodruff** (*Gallium odoratum*): From the Old French word, *rouelle*, meaning 'wheel', in reference to the way its leaves circle the stems.

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## T

**Teasel** (*Dipsacus fullonum*): From the former use of the prickly heads of this plant to tease or fluff up the surface fibres of newly woven cloth.

**Tradescantia** (*Tradescantia*): Named after John Tradescant, the 17th Century botanist, who served as gardener to Charles I and who, with his father, John Tradescant senior, travelled the world collecting plants from remote places.

**Tree of Heaven** (*Ailanthus altissima*): The common East Indian name for this tree is *Aylanto*, meaning 'heaven-tree' or 'tree reaching for the sky'. The English name, Tree of Heaven, is a translation of this.

**Tussilago** (*Tussilago*): The Coltsfoot plant. From the Latin 'tussis', meaning 'a cough'. The leaves of this plant have long been used in medicine to make a cough remedy.

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## V

**Viper's Bugloss** (*Echium vulgare*): Bugloss is of Greek origin, from a word signifying an ox's tongue, and alluding to the roughness and shape of the plant's leaves. The viper part of the name may derive from the spotted stem, said to recall marks on a snake, or an imagined resemblance between the dead flower-head and the seeds, and the head of a snake. Culpeper's 17th Century. *Complete Herbal* describes the plant as follows: 'It is an especial remedy against the biting of the Viper, and all other venomous beasts, or serpents; as also against poison, or poisonous herbs.'

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## W

**Wolfsbane** (*Aconitum*): The name is derived from the historical practice of using arrows tipped with the juice of this very toxic plant, or baits soaked in it, to poison wolves.

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## Y

**Yellow Archangel** (*Lamium galeobdolon*): The origin of this name is not completely clear, but it is thought to have come from its virtue of not stinging, despite being part of the 'deadnettle' family.

**Yucca** (*Yucca*): From *yuca*, the Carib Indian name for the Cassava or Tapioca plant (*Manihot esculenta*), the connection being that the starchy cassava root and the young Yucca flowers and stalks were both roasted for food. This plant is distinguished by the fact that it can only be pollinated by hand, or by the Yucca moth, which is genetically programmed to stuff a little ball of pollen into the cup-shaped stigma of each Yucca flower.

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## Z

**Zinnia** (*Zinnia*): Named for the 18th Century German botanist Johann Gottfried Zinn.

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