

Herb Garden Diary



The Purple Gate Farm Newsletter

December 2009

Our Herb Garden Diary Newsletter explores herbal knowledge, practical garden information with historical insight and current research to reveal the delight and enrichment of life by the growing and using of herbs. We explore the seasons in our south central Texas gardens and share our gardening experiences in this environment.

A Rose by any other name is still a Rose?



submitted by Mary H. Mills,
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In England, the very common plants, and those used as medicines had many names. Bird's-foot Trefoil for instance has been given 72 different English names and some of the common names attributed to it were

used to describe other unrelated plants. There are two different species of plants commonly known as skunk cabbage, many different species of plants are called tumbleweed, dozens of plants are known commonly as daisies and hundreds of different plants are just called moss. Some way needed to be devised to communicate about a specific plant with people in other areas of the world.

The Latin language offered botanists a solution to the confusion. Latin had been a universal language and a root language to many languages in use today. Latin isn't spoken by anyone now so it does not change over time as a living language does. A Latin name can mean exactly the same thing as it did 300 years ago. Carl Linnaeus (1707-79) chose a naming system which was based on Latin. The Latin names he gave to plants had two parts. The first part of the name was called the **Genus** (like our surname). For instance, Speedwells were called *Veronica* for the first name and after that followed another name to make it different from any other Speedwell. That second or **species** name (like our given name) might describe where it was found, its anatomy, life cycle, temperature tolerance or growing habit (tall or creeping, for example). Species names may also include the plants uses (Is it toxic or edible? Is it medicinal?) and it may include information about the plants habitat (Is it found in swamp, woods, open fields etc). Species names may commemorate the name of its discoverer or a botanist who worked on the plant.

When we write officially about plants we always use the Latin names but this isn't as straightforward as it sounds. Although Carl Linnaeus started the naming system, professional scientists have other methods of finding out which genus (first name) a plant belongs to. If they find that a plant has been classified incorrectly they change the

name. Sometimes some plants will have more than one Latin name, either because research has assigned a different Latin name to a plant that already has a Latin name or because not all scientists agree on everything. In both cases the two names are often cross-referenced to be sure the same plant is being discussed. In the future, plant identification will change due to the genome project that will allow botanists to classify plants using DNA.

For us, Latin names are clues to the type of plant we are finding in nurseries and catalogues for our gardens. Latin species names give us some idea of the shape of the plant or describe the plant in some way, for example:

Latin	English meaning
acutus/acuta	sharp pointed
annuus/annua	annual, living 1 year
lanceolatus/lanceolata	narrowly elliptical
officinalis	used in medic

A Rose by any other name

Is Still a Rose



But--which rose do you mean ?

Holiday herbs like mistletoe and pine can cure your holiday ailments.

Pine (*Pinus* species) is an expectorant and antioxidant and has been used in cough syrups.



Mistletoe (*Viscum album* in Europe and *Phoradendron serotinum* in America.)



CAUTION:

The Difference in Mistletoes is important.

European mistletoe (*Viscum album* L.) is safe and has been used medicinally; it has been used in Europe to treat seizures and headaches. Modern herbalists use small amounts to lower blood pressure, promote menstrual flow and as a diuretic.

American mistletoe (*Phoradendron* spp) is poisonous.

Mistletoe berries are extremely poisonous and can cause excessive salivating, vomiting, diarrhea, excessive urination, heavy breathing and a fast heart rate.

Washington Irving wrote in 1820:

At Christmas, the young men had the privilege of kissing ladies under mistletoe, "plucking each time a berry from the bush." Once all the berries had been plucked, no more kissing was allowed.

Another caution:

Holly berries are poisonous and can cause gastric intestinal distress, vomiting and diarrhea in small children and pets. Contact the poison control center, your doctor or vet if you think a child or pet has ingested holly berries.



Texas Herbal Holiday

submitted by Mary H. Mills, pgherbfarm.com

Growing herbs year-round is one of the joys of living in Texas. In fact the fall and early winter are great times to plant perennial herbs. Mulching will help protect the roots from freezing and covering tender plants during the brief freezes of south-central Texas will start your herb garden off to a great start in spring.

Oregano, rosemary, thyme, bay laurel, garlic, chives, sage, dill and cilantro grow well throughout Texas winters. Dill, fennel and cilantro prefer to grow in Texas during the cooler part of the year. I was disappointed to learn that cilantro does not do it's best when tomatoes and peppers ripen in my summer garden. I found that I could freeze the tomatoes and peppers and create wonderful Tex/Mex dishes seasoned with cilantro that warmed my family during the cool weather.

Bay Laurel, a small tree or large bush is the source of bay laurel, a fragrant flavor that freshens foods cooked a long time such as slow cooker recipes, stews and soups. The plant is slow growing and is happy in a container on the patio or in a south facing window in winter. The leaves make a fragrant addition to holiday wreaths.

Rosemary is my favorite year-round herb. Although our soil at the Purple Gate Herb Farm is slightly acid and rosemary prefers alkaline soil, the plant does pretty well here. It has survived the hot, dry, drought of summer and continues to fill the air with a fresh, pine-like scent in December. A wreath of rosemary branches can be hung to greet visitors at the front door. A swag over a fireplace or mirror on the wall is festive and functional. The fragrance freshens indoor closed rooms and rosemary contains a powerful antibacterial, rosmarin, that may help keep winter colds in check. Hospital staffs in France once burned rosemary in sick rooms to cleanse the air of pathogens. Throw some thicker rosemary twigs on the fire in a fireplace to enjoy the rich scent throughout a room. A few minutes in a microwave just before visitors arrive will greet them with a welcoming fragrance. (watch carefully and do not catch the twigs on fire.)

I hope you find more wonderful ways to enjoy herbs during the Texas Holiday season. Have a wonderful December and I hope to hear from you in 2010. Email me to share an herbal related story, tip or inspiration:

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