

The New Universal Language of Plants

When Linnaeus standardized the system of species description in the 18th century, Latin was the language of science. So it has remained, if only in a highly technical sense. The binomial names used by *Homo sapiens* are Latin, and for years botanists, unlike zoologists, were still required to use a page or two of Latin to describe the distinctive characteristics of a newly named species — the attributes that made it different from any other. But no more. As of Jan. 1, [diagnostic botanical descriptions may be written in Latin or English](#), and the electronic publication of new names is accepted.

These changes acknowledge some basic facts. Botanical Latin is barely Latin at all, since it includes a huge new scientific vocabulary that would have stumped Cicero. Nor is a Latin description of a new species likely to be more accurate or internationally intelligible than one in English. Furthermore, scientific publication is increasingly moving to the Internet, expanding accessibility. It makes no sense to slow the rate of botanical description by forcing scientists to learn how to encode their discoveries in Latin or by putting up with the lag time in getting a discovery into actual print.

Unlike modern botanists, Linnaeus felt no special urgency in going about his job. As climate change alters our world, anything that speeds up the description of species before they vanish is welcome. As it is, botanists have described roughly 200,000 species, with about 2,000 new species being described each year at the current rate. At best, they are less than halfway through the task of indexing all the plants, fungi and algae on earth.

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