

OUT ON A LIMB

‘What’s in a name?’

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Did you ever wonder from where some plant names come? Many think they must have come from a Latin derivative and many are. I went home from work last week, end of January and noticed my daffodils had emerged in the midst of 30 degree weather. It’s funny how a Landscape Architect’s brain works. When I saw them I thought ‘Narcissus’, not ‘Daffodils’, as we are taught to think botanically first and then common names. While I sat in my car I reflected as to how the Narcissus plant was named.

It comes from Greek mythology and not being a Greek mythology scholar, I’ll take a shot at the explanation. Narcissus was a very handsome Greek hunter, son of the river god Cephissus of ancient Greece and nymph (female spirit) Liriope. I bet you didn’t think that ‘Liriope’ (type of female spirit) would show up in this story, but I digress. He was pursued endlessly by Echo, a mountain nymph who continuously called his name day and night but he never answered causing her form to fade and in the end leaving her repeating the words of others. For revenge, Nemesis (Goddess of revenge) lured him to a pool where he leaned down and saw a reflection and fell deeply in love not realizing it was a reflection of himself. Unable to leave the image which could not reciprocate his love, he turned into a yellow and white flower (Narcissus).

So now we know about Narcissus and narcissisms and where our word Echo comes from Liriope: and Nemesis”. We all know people who are narcissistic.

This brings me to why plants are named botanically. Plants only have one universal botanical name while they may have multiple common names causing confusion in discussion. I could speak to a plants man in China or Japan and as long as we spoke botanically we would be able to understand each other without knowing either’s native language. A plant is identified by ‘Genus’, species variety and ‘cultivar’. Example: *Cornus florida* var. *rubra* ‘Cherokee Chief’. ‘*Cornus*’ tells me that it is a dogwood, *florida* tells me that it is a flowering dogwood, *rubra* tells me that it is red and ‘Cherokee Chief’ identifies the cultivar. It is a lot more specific than just saying Dogwood. When professionals refer to plants by their botanical names, we are not trying to show off.

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