WHAT'S IN A NAME? YOU NAME IT

By Irene Virag

WHEN IT comes to flowers, I've always been charmed by names like Love-in-a-mist and Bridal Wreath and Lady's-Mantle. Especially Love-in-a-mist, which oozes with romance - it stirs visions of courtly cavaliers bowing to fair damsels in glades by soft flowing streams as a fine mist films the morning.

As it turns out, the origin of the name Love-in-a-mist may have more to do with sex than affairs of the heart. Instead of describing the lavender blooms, the name refers more anatomically to the delicate hair-like leaves that encircle them. Bridal Wreath is an eminently proper name - stemming from the small white flowers reminiscent of weddings. But Lady's-Mantle is no goody-goody. The moniker derives from its leaves, which resemble not just a soft green cloak but one whose precincts invite a lover's intrusion.

In old, old times, such earthy associations were common. By the 1700s, the allusions had been softened, but it was popular practice to describe women in terms of flowers. And at the heart of all the flowery language, sex was still an operative word. Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish scientist who developed the botanical classification of plants according to genus and species, offered a cogent perspective. He said the sexual attributes "of plants we regard with delight, of animals with abomination, of ourselves with strange thoughts."

Linnaeus, who used a trumpet and French horn band to call his students together at outdoor lectures, stirred controversy by describing stamens as "husbands," pistils as "wives" and petals as "bridal beds which the Creator has so gloriously arranged, adorned with such noble bed-curtains and perfumed with so many sweet scents that the bride-groom may celebrate his nuptials with his bride with all the greater solemnity." Personally, I think the man had problems.

I learned all this and a great deal more from "Stearn's Dictionary of Plant Names for Gardeners" by William T. Stearn (Cassell Publishers) and "100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names" by Diana Wells (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill) - a small tome I've been keeping on my shelf and recently had occasion to read. "If all the flowers died," Wells writes, "the world we know would be no more." So she believes that it's important to trace their roots and make them part of our lives.

And they are - not just for gardeners but for everybody who responds to the scent of a rose or the sight of an orchid or the splash of daffodils on a spring day. When the subject is flowers, what's in a name is just about everything under the sun - love and lust, myths and magic, people and places.

I'm talking, of course, about common names - garden Latin is best left for another column. Some common names of flowers are clearly descriptive. Balloon flower and morning glory, for a couple of examples, and bleeding heart, too. Bleeding heart is also known as "lady in the bath" because that's what it looks like when you turn it upside down and pull it slightly open.

The nomenclature of Dogwood is a little more complex. Legend has it that the Trojan horse was built of Cornelian cherry, a variety of dogwood, and that its berries were gobbled up by Odysseus troops after Circe turned them into pigs. John Parkinson, a 17th-Century London herbalist, called English dogwood "the Doggeberry tree, because the berries are not fit to be eaten, or to be given to a dogge." Other authorities credit its name to a concoction made from the tree's leaves that was used to rid dogs of fleas.

The legends of flower names are lovely. Forget-me-nots are true blue on Valentine cards and D.H. Lawrence

placed some of them in a delicate area that Lady Chatterly would be sure to remember. But the name forget-me-not actually comes from a German expression, which means just that. Legend holds that a knight was picking a bouquet for his fair lady on a riverbank, lost his footing and fell in the water. Before he drowned, he tossed the flowers to his sweetheart and cried out "Vergiss mein nicht." Forget-me-not.

Another love story is the tale of Narcissus, the young Greek hunk who went ga-ga over his reflection in a pool. He pined away for the unattainable image and died, turning into the flower that bears his name and showing us that narcissistic behavior can be fatal.

Other flowers are named after interesting people. Forsythia's namesake was William Forsyth, superintendent of the Royal Gardens of Kensington Palace in the late l700s. I'm intrigued by Forsyth, who shook up his fellow horticulturists by huckstering something called "Forsyth's Plaister." He claimed the concoction could heal wounds in growing trees and even bring back oak trees "where nothing remained but the bark." The "plaister" was eventually discredited. It was composed of cow dung, lime, wood ashes and sand mixed into a paste with soap suds and urine.

Bougainvillea was named after an explorer, Louis Antoine de Bougainville, who sailed around the world from 1767 to 1769. It was discovered in Tahiti by his botanist friend, Philibert Commerson, whom Bougainville invited on the trip to help soothe Commerson's grief over the death of his wife. The namesake of poinsettia is Joel Roberts Poinsette, the first U.S. ambassador to Mexico, who brought the plant home to his native South Carolina in 1833.

If you're like me, you probably thought the camellia was named for Camille, the famous French courtesan better known as the Lady of the Camellias because she always carried a bouquet of the flowers. I'm not sure what message she was trying to send but on 25 days of the month they were white and the other five days they were red. Anyway, it's more likely that Camille took her name from the flower rather than the other way around. Linnaeus named the camellia in honor of Georg Josef Kamel, a Jesuit pharmacist from Moravia who may never even have seen one. By the way, Linnaeus changed the K in Kamel to a C in order to conform to the Latin alphabet.

There are lots of other fascinating stories but you might want to do a little digging for yourself.

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