

Not Just Cats Are Curious!

If you are inside perusing catalogs these cold January days, you may have wondered why Asters have wandered. For example, the native blue wood aster is now classified *Symphyotrichum cordifolium*: also roses and such disparate items as cannabis and nettles belong to the same order?

Being curious, you have known the impact on what we thought we knew by the discoveries of the human genome project. I understand none of this stellar achievement but I accept the fact that the influence of such a project has filtered into other areas of human knowledge – into the taxonomy of plants. The result is a new system and even the venerable Oxford Botanic Garden, established in 1621 “so that learning may be improved”, is renaming and rearranging. All of this proves Aristotle’s dictum “All men by nature desire to know.”

Even before Aristotle (384-322 BC) men classified plants using contrast and difference in their descriptions, what it was and what it was not. There was never an era where the desire to know the nature and uses of plant material faltered.

Along with the burgeoning of the desire to know all about everything that exploded with the Renaissance was the desire of apothecaries and plant enthusiasts to know what to call a plant. Seeds, plants, and especially bulbs had followed the Silk Road from East to West and the treasures had left their names behind with the language in which they had meaning.

As the plants passed from owner to owner they were described of course and given names which were an attempt to pin down their distinctive characteristics. From country to country the language common to the educated was Latin so those names were in Latin. As the cultivation of medicinal plants was terribly important, scholars strove to give some uniformity to what must have been a horticultural tower of Babel.

The invention of the printing press in 1454 gave promise that it was possible to achieve a degree of standardization in naming plants. Although plant books and herbals preceded the invention of printing, the first book to become a bestseller was the herbal by Otto Brunfels printed in 1530. Its value lay in the woodcuts accompanying the text. The text was a reworking from ancient classical sources but those first printed pictures of flowers would be recognized throughout Europe and those names and faces finally connected! The artist, Hans Weiditz, drew from nature, having been taught by German Renaissance artist Albrecht Durer that acute observation was essential, the plant and not the artist must dominate.

In Italy another artist was making pictures of plant parts without either wood or cutting. Leonardo da Vinci made what were termed physiotypes. He coated leaves with soot/ carbon and pressed them against paper. Wonderful- and there is no end to the understanding of plants.

TIPS:

Keep an eye on your perennial grasses such as pennisetum, schizachyrium, panicum and miscanthus. When new growth is discernible, cut off the old leaves. Some species may not be ready to shear until mid-spring but you know how some plants have minds of their own. If the new leaves arrive ahead of schedule it is hard to cut back the old without spoiling the new. If you wish to divide the clump, it can be done before the new growth appears. One easy way is to just bisect the clump with a sharp spade. Grasses, bless them, are tough!

Another bit of information: - raised beds produce nearly twice the vegetables than flat ones provide. That surprised me, as did the fact that the same observation applies to posies. This is useful to try if you want flowers to cut for bouquets.