Changes in the Garden World

By Maureen O’Connell

Changes do not come quickly or often in the garden world, but this January brought two significant announcements. On January 1, the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature removed the requirement that new plant species be described in Latin. This rule was in place since 1908, but Latin was the language of botanists since the Renaissance. The binomial tradition of scientific nomenclature, such as *Homo sapiens* for humans, *Syringa* for lilacs, and *Cornus* for dogwoods, dates to the 1753 publication of *Species Plantarum* by Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus. There were several reasons for this change to naming plants in English, and they were not solely for academic ones. Botanists continually seek to create a complete inventory of the world’s plant life. This is a daunting task. It is believed that there may be as many as 100,000 plant species that are not yet known to science. Plants play an extremely important role on our planet: they are sources of materials and medicines; they are part of our food chain; and they produce the oxygen we breathe. The naming of a new plant is a laborious process, and the requirement to use Latin makes the process even more difficult and long. Practically speaking, there are fewer people studying Latin today.

Plants are in danger of extinction in many parts of the globe. Deforestation, the spread of invasive plants, and the much-debated subject of climate change threaten them. Removing Latin as the lingua franca of the naming of plant species will hopefully simplify and speed up this process. James S. Miller, dean and vice president for science at the New York Botanical Garden, welcomes this change as an important step in modernizing and accelerating one of the basic activities of biological sciences: cataloguing the world’s biodiversity. “There is an urgency in describing the plants of the world,” he said. “ I don’t think we have any capacity to understand and take care of nature unless we can identify it.”

Do you know what plant zone Maryland is in? As of January 25, the Washington, D.C. region is more welcoming to more tender plants. On that date, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) unveiled a new version of its Plant Hardiness Zone Map. Maryland is now in zone 7, up from a 6 listing. This is the first update since 1990. This map of the U.S. shows color-coded zones which are used as a guide to what flowers, shrubs, and trees will survive in a particular geographical area. The higher the zone number, the warmer the average low winter temperature will be. It doesn’t take a scientist to tell a gardener that these zones are shifting northward. Our winters are not as cold as they used to be; spring planting comes earlier; and the summers seem hotter. There are exceptions, such as last winter’s record-breaking temperatures and snowfall. The Department of Agriculture stopped short of making a climate change connection. Kim Kaplan, a spokeswoman for the USDA’s Agricultural Research Service, said, “The map is not a good instrument for determining climate change. It’s not that there hasn’t been climate change; it’s that the map isn’t a good vehicle for demonstrating it.”

I use the zone map as a basic guide. Winter temperatures are not the only factor that influences a plant’s survival. Our summer’s heat, humidity, and periods of drought can stress a plant as much as or more so than a cold winter. You might have noticed that in some winters with heavy snowfalls, plants can do very well. The snow acts as a protective blanket. I find that part of the challenge of gardening is experimenting with different plants that may not fit into our climactic conditions. Some years, our expectations prove true, and other years, we might be surprised with our experiments. When I was in Cape Town, South Africa a few years ago, I fell in love with the agapanthus plant which grew everywhere from roadsides to well-manicured gardens. I planted it in a container so I could put it in a protected area for the winter. For three years now, every summer it has put out beautiful, green foliage but no flowers. Maybe this year I will be rewarded with violet-blue flower heads.

This new guide map might expand the approved array of plants for a zone. This is a good opportunity to experiment with truly unique and unusual plants.