

For Tree Tips column on September 24, 2004
by Steve Rasmussen, Nebraska Forest Service District Forester

Names of Trees

Trees have different types of names just as people do. Just as my name for legal and identification purposes is Steven Duane Rasmussen, I may be called Mr. Rasmussen, Steve, or “Ras” by different people or friends. The tree we call boxelder is called Manitoba maple or ashleaf maple in other locations. However, the boxelder’s identifying and “legal” name is *Acer negundo*. From the United States to China to Canada to Germany, it is recognized as that plant even though it has the different common names.

Specific names for true identification of the trees and other plants is in Latin and has a genus and species component. This is called the Linnaeus binomial system adapted after the famous Swedish botanist, Carl Linnaeus, in the early 1700s. This makes the naming of trees (and all plants) more precise and universal and provides an international system of naming used by scientists and professionals around the world no matter what the native language may be. The Latin names used will many times reflect the distinct characteristics for that genus or species. For example, the species name for bur oak is *macrocarpa* which means large cap and relates to the large “cap” on the acorn that identifies the bur oak from other oaks. Another example is the species name for northern red oak is *rubra*. This relates to the fall red (*rubra* means reddish) color of the leaves that gives this oak its common name.

Plants are grouped by their botanical similarities. A botanical family of plants shares certain characteristics such as foliage, flower form, fruit/seed production or other feature. These common characteristics are unique enough to separate that group from other plants. The first name of a botanical binomial is the genus name. Within the rose family for example, one would find *Prunus* (the group we commonly call stone fruits like plums and cherries), *Malus* (apples and crabapples), *Rubus* (bramble-type berries), and *Rosa* (the garden roses). The second name of the botanical binomial is the species and this narrows the description down even more precise. For instance, *Prunus americana* is American plum and *Prunus virginiana* is chokecherry. Both have the same characteristics that put them together in the *Prunus* genus and yet have distinct differences (most noticeable being the fruits) that give them unique species characteristics.

These specific and distinct names are useful when making sure you are getting the tree or plant you want. All good arboretum sites will have common names and the distinct Latin name of genus and species on the identification labels. Use the Latin name for accurate identification. When plants are sold, they should have the Latin name on the tag. Purchase the plants according to the Latin genus and species. This is the more accurate way of assuring you will have the plant you want. While it may seem daunting to pronounce these botanical names, it is the best way to find the right plant in the market place.

This is the last Tree Tips column for the 2004 season. If you have specific tree or plant questions, you can contact me at my UN-L Nebraska Forest Service office (370-4024) or contact your local county’s UN-L Cooperative Extension office. Have a great fall and winter.