

Provisional Names: A Nomenclatural Quandary

Donald H. Voss — Vienna, Virginia

Finding a satisfactory way to refer to a plant being studied or considered for selection and distribution prior to the formal establishment of a cultivar epithet is a problem of long standing in the horticultural community. The situation is not directly addressed in the Cultivated Plant Code.(1)

The Code deals with the formation, establishment, and use of cultivar and group names. To be established, a name must be printed in a dated publication that is distributed to the general public (or at least to institutions with libraries accessible to botanists) or appear in a register maintained by a statutory registration authority. The name must conform to provisions of the Code and be accompanied by a description or reference to a previously published description.

When referring to plants being studied or considered for selection and formal naming, many researchers and growers use codes that are a combination of letters and numbers: this is a wise choice, although (because of a new article in the Code) its status may no longer be unambiguous. Using words or proper names as common names (i.e., as provisional names without nomenclatural standing) instead of using letter/number codes is a most unfortunate choice. Dr. A. C. Leslie, Registrar, International Cultivar Registration Authority: *Rhododendron*, has stated emphatically that the use of names not intended to be formally established as cultivar epithets should be avoided: experience shows that someone will sooner or later treat them as cultivar epithets.(2)

To reduce the chance for misuse, a letter/number code or a name (should the author reject the use of a code) not meant to be interpreted as a cultivar epithet should be accompanied by an explicit statement of its status:

- The provisional code or name should **not** be placed between quotation marks—single or double. Single quotation marks are reserved for use as unique identifiers of a cultivar epithet, and no clear meaning can be inferred from the use of double quotation marks.
- For a selection from the wild, the code should be followed by the words “collector’s number.” (Art. 19.27. Note 2.: “Plants are sometimes circulated under collector’s or breeder’s numbers that are made up of

sequences of letters and numbers or [of] numbers. These are not to be taken as being cultivar epithets.”)

- For a selection from cultivated material, the code should be followed by the words “breeder’s number.” (Art. 19.27. Note 2.)
- For either type of material, if a name is used, it should be followed by the words “name is provisional, not accepted by the author.” (Dr. Leslie refers to Art. 24.5.: “A name that has not been accepted by the author who publishes it . . . is not regarded as being established.”)
- Editorially, the words defining the status of a code or name may appear in parentheses following the code or name, or may be treated as a footnote.

Those considering naming cultivars will benefit the horticultural community if they adopt one of the following courses of action:

- Until final determination is made to distribute a cultivar, use only a letter/number code (breeder’s number) to identify it. Provide a cultivar epithet only when the plant is to be distributed, and (strongly recommended though not required, register the name with the ARS Plant Names Registrar). Registration provides a permanent record of a plant’s description and helps reduce confusion that results from duplication of names. In any event, *please* check a proposed cultivar epithet with the Plant Names Registrar to avoid duplicating a name already in use.
- If a plant is not to be distributed, keep it under a breeder’s number: **Don’t name that plant!**

References

1. Brickell, C.D., et al. 2004. *International Code of Nomenclature for Cultivated Plants* (I.C.N.C.P. or Cultivated Plant Code). Seventh ed. International Society for Horticultural Science.
2. Leslie, Alan C. 2006. Personal communication.

Donald Voss is an economist by training and an active gardener with a scholarly interest in azaleas and rhododendrons. Don is an expert on the Robin Hill hybrid azaleas, and he currently volunteers at the herbarium of the US National Arboretum.

Names and Epithets

In common usage, a ‘name’ provides a convenient way to refer to something—animal, vegetable, or mineral. It may be arbitrary, descriptive, complimentary, or opprobrious. In the context of the Cultivated Plant Code, however, the word ‘name’ has a restricted meaning and the word ‘epithet’ is introduced. The name of a cultivar (cultivated variety) consists of its botanical name (at least the genus) plus the cultivar epithet. Thus, ‘Camp’s Red’ (which in the vernacular we call a name) is technically the cultivar epithet for a plant named *Rhododendron* ‘Camp’s Red’ or *Rhododendron cumberlandense* ‘Camp’s Red’.