

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

One of our members, Ron Parker, made an observation that many common English names for plants share their names with animals and he has sent me a list of several examples. I'm sure we are all familiar with the orchids that take their names from the animals that they are either thought to resemble or possibly be pollinated by, such as the Bee Orchid, Early Spider-orchid, Fly Orchid and Lizard Orchid, with the central lobe of its labellum resembling the long tongue of a lizard.



Lizard Orchid

There are several references to birds, with the seed-pods of Bird's-foot and Bird's-foot-trefoil looking like the claws on a bird's foot, the central yellow spot in Bird's-eye Primrose considered by Gerard to resemble the eye of a bird and the roots of Bird's-nest Orchid thought to look like the dense interwoven parts of a bird's nest. But why Bird Cherry and Bird-in-a-bush? Other references to specific bird species include Crane's-bills and Stork's-bills, which reference the shape of the seed pod, Cuckooflower, because it flowers at the same time as the cuckoo sings, and Goosefoots, because the leaves are similar to the footprint of a Goose. The English name Hawkbit derives from the medieval belief that hawks ate the plant to improve their eyesight. Finally, Larkspur has a long corolla tube that takes the shape of the spur, or long hind claw, on the foot of a lark.



Bird's-foot-trefoil

Cats and dogs, especially in their colloquial forms, feature highly on the list. Catmint, a plant that cats show a liking for, Cat's-tail (like Squirrel-tail and Rat's-tail Fescues and Dog's-tail, Mare's-tail and Mouse-tail), where the inflorescence looks like a tail and Cat's-ear (like Mouse-ear) for the fine hairs on the leaves. The word 'dog' is often used in a herbal sense to mean 'inferior', so Dog's Mercury was

considered inferior to Annual Mercury for use as an enema, Dog-violets were inferior to Sweet Violets because they lacked scent and the Dog Rose wasn't as striking as the Garden Roses (although I might disagree on that one). Dogwood, whilst having beautiful foliage in the autumn, wasn't considered a worthwhile plant – its fruits aren't edible, it has an unpleasant odour and its timber had few practical uses. However, Dog's-tooth Violet is again named for its appearance with the oblong white bulb resembling a dog's tooth.

Some other plants named after the parts of animals because of their similarity are the grasses Cock's-foot and Cockspur, where the shape is referring to the inflorescence, Adder's-tongue with the erect sporangia nestling within the leaf blade having the appearance of a tongue and Weasel's-snout, where the pink flowers resemble a miniature snapdragon and are followed by a hairy green fruit which is said to resemble a weasel's snout (you may need to use your imagination here). The Dandelion takes its name for the French Dent de lion or tooth of the lion referring to the jagged shape of the leaves.

The common name Cowslip may derive from the old English for cow dung, probably because the plant was often found growing amongst the manure in cow pastures. Similarly Oxlip, although this is more likely to be in wood pasture.

Some are a little more obscure and possibly requiring more imagination. The common name of Fox-and-cubs, which has often intrigued me, is apparently due to the appearance of the open flowers (the fox) beside the flower buds (the cubs).

I'm sure you can think of many more examples. Ron is challenging you to find as many names as you can that are associated with animals and try to work out their derivation. Maybe you would like to write something for a future magazine. It is a fascinating subject that requires further research. Over to you.

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