

The long and the short of it

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Botanical names can be confoundingly difficult to spell or pronounce. There are reasons why some are so long and seemingly indecipherable. Some names commemorate people, often well-known botanists, but occasionally those with less obvious connections. Many other names are intended to be descriptive, but these are frequently based around combinations of words taken from archaic languages that are, at best, only obscurely reflected in everyday English.

It took me, as an enthusiastic student, numerous attempts before the name *Muehlenbeckia ephedroides* rolled reliably off the tongue, let alone the pen. Nevertheless, the name does have reasoned origins. The genus *Muehlenbeckia*, which also occurs around the Pacific Rim in North and South America, Papua New Guinea and Australia, was named after the European physician, botanical collector and bryologist Henri Gustave Muehlenbeck (1798-1845). Apart from his name-sake genus, Muehlenbeck is most unlikely to have had many direct connections with New Zealand, so we can perhaps be forgiven for not being familiar with the spelling of his name. The species name *ephedroides* alludes to the fact that the plant has a remarkably similar appearance to some species of the genus *Ephedra*, in the family Ephedraceae. This genus can be found in arid regions including western South America, south-western North America, southern Europe, northern Africa, south-western and central Asia and northern China – but not in New Zealand. Our *Muehlenbeckia ephedroides* is in the family Polygonaceae, so is not closely related, but has presumably taken on a similar growth form to cope with similar growing conditions. The suffix ‘oides’ comes from ancient Greek and simply means ‘resembling’. It pops up quite often in other species names, which can be really useful – provided one is familiar with the reference plant. So, for most of us, the name *Muehlenbeckia ephedroides* simply refers to a plant named after a person we probably don’t know anything about, that superficially resembles another plant we probably don’t know anything about. Nevertheless, both the name and the plant itself are now firm favourites.

Referencing a plant’s key characters in its names can be really handy, but it can be rather unhelpful if a character is ephemeral or not all that distinctive. The species name for *Olearia fragrantissima*, Asteraceae family, comes from the Latin ‘fragrans’ meaning beautifully scented, and the suffix ‘issima’ meaning ‘the most’. The flowers are indeed deliciously scented, reminiscent of ripe peaches, but several other species of the *Olearia* genus arguably have equally strong and attractive scents. *Olearia hectorii*, *O. coriacea* and *O. solandri* are serious title contenders. Deciding which species is the most beautifully scented is rather a matter of personal experience and preference.

The genus and species names of *Coprosma foetidissima* roughly translate as ‘dung smell, the most foetid’. Despite the somewhat negative connotations, this name is quite apt and memorable. Traipsing through a *Coprosma foetidissima*-punctuated understory can certainly be somewhat disconcerting for the uninitiated.

It can be tricky enough writing these long names down in the comforts of one’s home or office, but the difficulty seems to compound itself out in the field. Most field botanists instead shorten each name down to something that is still safely recognisable, yet takes the minimum of time and space to record. There are bound to be variations, but the most popular system centres around using only the first three letters of both genus and species. Thus, *Muehlenbeckia ephedroides* becomes *Mue eph*, *Olearia fragrantissima* becomes *Ole fra*, and so on. As one becomes more familiar with the abridged genus and species, they can

even be used in verbal exchanges, especially if they roll off the tongue easily. *Cop rot* has a certain appeal, and it is certainly faster to say than *Coprosma rotundifolia*. The alliterations of *Pit pat* for *Pittosporum patulum* and *Bot bif* for *Botrychium bifforme*, and the repetition of *Dac dac* for *Dacrycarpus dacrydioides* make them real favourites. Likewise, the repeated letter 'o' in *Ole pol* for *Olearia polita* makes this shortened name just a little cumbersome, yet somehow fun to say. I have yet to knowingly encounter *Carex carsei*, but its shortened name shouldn't be difficult to remember, or to say.

One wonders then, whether this system might be used to advantage for other aspects of Bot Soc's activities. For instance, our annual journal is made up of thousands of individual words, all of which we print in full, resulting in a quite sizeable booklet that, for all its merits, is expensive to print and to post. Your committee is currently grappling with ways by which we could reduce those costs. What if we could apply the same word-shortening treatment and reduce all those words down to three letters each? That would result in a considerable saving in journal size, and in production costs. If so, this article would instead be titled 'The lon and the sho of it'. So far so good.

Of cou, the use of sho bot nam is not wit its pro, it can occ lea to som con. For ins, if we are wri the sho nam *Pse col*, we mig be ref to *Pse col*, in the Ara fam, a sma tre wit thr to fiv ses lea, whi can be fou in mon to sub alp for and scr in the Nor, Sou and Ste Isl. Or, we mig ins be ref to *Pse col*, als kno as pep tre or by its Māo nam hor, a mem of the Win fam. Thi shr wit lea blo red on the upp sur and a whi low sur can be fou in dam gul and edg of low to mon for, aga in the Nor, Sou and Ste Isl. In thi cas one can sim add an ext let to eit the gen nam or the spe nam in ord to dis bet the two. Thu, we eit get *Psep col* and *Psew col* – or *Pse cole* and *Pse colo*. This use of four lett inst of thre does redu ambi, but rath defe the purp of the exer. Thus, with rare exce, we reve back to usin thre lett agai unle ther is some usef adva to be gain.

One exc I oft mak is for the pri shi fer *Pol ves*, in the Dry fam. The dis of thi spe is gen con to the wet and col par of New Zea. Hab inc for mar, dam gul, scr and tus gra, esp on sou asp. The sho nam *Pol ves* is per fit for pur, yet I qui oft fin mys usi fou let ins of thr and wri *Poly vest*. The is a rea. Tho wet and col pla whe one fin thi fer are the sam pla whe I oft fin mys wea my wet and col wea gea, fre inc a pol ves. The fou-let nam *Poly vest* rem me abo the wet and col hab pre of the spe.

Occ two spe in the sam gen can hav the sam sho nam. For ins, *Asp fla*, in the Asp fam, com kno as nec fer, is a spe of dry for and scr, oft for spr mat ove the gro sur. The oth opt, *Asp fla*, is an epi of dam for, usu fou per on the tru of tre or tre fer. The two may occ occ in the sam loc, thu may be rec on the sam spe lis. Aga, an ext let can be add to the sho spe nam to dif the two, thu we get *Asp flab* and *Asp flac*.

Gen wit a hig num of spe can be par awk – tak for exa the sed and hoo gra. When the gen *Unc* was mer int the gen *Car*, we end up wit two sho nam opt eac for *Car app*, *Car ast*, *Car auc*, *Car cor*, *Car dru*, *Car fla*, *Car sec*, *Car tra* and *Car unc*. *Car sub* has thr pos opt wit the exp *Car* gen. And of cou, the can be opt wit oth gen. One has to won whe the pot for con was con whe som of the new bot nam wer bei dec on?

The orc *Apo bif* pro an exa of a sho nam tha can bri a smi. Thi pla can be fou in mon scr, and has two une bas lea, oft blo wit bro spo. The flo are whi and usu sol, and can be see fro Dec to Jan. The ful nam *Apo bif*, wit its nin syl, see gra and imp. In con, the muc sho *Apo bif*, wit jus thr syl, see alm dis. The sho nam alm pok fun at the pom of the ful nam. Sim, the sho nam *Rum adi* is a mem and enj alt to the lon and rat awk ful nam *Rum adi*.

In one cas the sho nam has als pro the bas for the com nam. The sma her we cur ref to as *Ana bel* was pre kno as *Hel bel*. The sho ver of thi, *Hel bel*, had the pai of let 'ls' add to bot the

gen and spe, to bec Hel bel, whi is now in wid use as its com nam. Des the cha of gen, the com nam Hel bel has stu. Tha sai, Ana bel (in thi cas with the 'ls' add onl to the sho spe nam) als has som app and is now fre hea in bot ban.

In a few cas, use of the sho nam pro ver lit adv. The ful bot nam for the ubi sil tus is alr sho - *Poa cit*. Thi get sho by jus the let 'a', fro *Poa cit* to *Poa cit* – som mig say har wor the eff. How, for the lik of *Pse lut*, *Epi bil*, *Epi kom*, *Epi num*, *Lag pin*, *Lep jun*, *Cal tug*, *Not ang* and *Wah alb*, the adv are rea qui sub. And tha is not tak pos var and sub int acc.

Whether any of this might be used to further advantage is yet to be determined. That is in the capable hands of your duly elected Botanical Society committee. Perhaps Canterbury Botanical Society might see this as an opportunity to start a new trend? After all, we already use the system on a regular basis every time we refer to ourselves as Bot Soc.

Dedication

Dedicated, with both thanks and advance apologies, to fellow Bot Soc members who, even on a Bot Soc camp, have been observed discussing whose turn it was to fill in that day's newspaper word puzzles.

References

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