

Botanical and common names

There is a lot of confusion about botanical names, which is not surprising since the situation itself is confusing. As science advances, species are renamed to reflect the latest knowledge. Two iconic Australian species, Red Cedar (*Toona ciliata*) and Huon Pine (*Lagarostrobos franklinii*), for example, have been subject to changes in botanical names, and some publications and timber retailers still use the obsolete versions, e.g. *Cedrella toona*, *Cedrella australis* and *Toona australis* for Red Cedar or *Dacrydium franklinii* for Huon Pine.

Also the 'bloodwood' group of the Genus *Eucalyptus* has been reclassified into a new genus *Corymbia*. This genus contains familiar species such as Spotted gum (now *C. maculata*) and Red flowering gum from WA (now *C. ficifolia*). It also happens that a species may be described and named, and it turns out that it has previously been described and named. In this case, the original name is used.

A second challenge is that many of the names are of Latin or Greek origin, and not too many of us are fluent in either.

A convention, which developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and popularised by the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, is to give all living things a two part name. The first is the genus, and the second identifies the species within the genus. Sometimes there is a subspecies with variations, but not considered sufficient to warrant a new species. In this case a third name is given. The botanical name is always italicised, with the first letter of the genus name in upper case, and the remainder in lower case. Where the genus is known, but the species is not, then 'sp.' is added, e.g. a piece of Tasmanian oak/Vic ash may be described as *Eucalyptus* sp. It is a convention in Latin that where a word is abbreviated, the final letter is repeated to indicate a plural. Taking Tasmanian oak/Vic ash again, which includes three closely related species, when referring to it in general, it is *Eucalyptus* spp. Note that 'sp' or 'spp', not being part of the name, is not italicised. In a text referring to various species within a genus, the genus can be abbreviated after the first mention of it. Thus *Eucalyptus regnans* may be followed by *E. obliqua* or *E. delegatensis*, in the context that all three form the collective commercial common name "Tasmanian oak".

Matching a botanical name to a common or commercial name is also fraught with problems. There is no control, such as with careful scientific description, to determine what actual species a common name represents. There are numerous examples of the same common name referring to different species, for example lance wood (nine species), dead finish (five species) or silky oak (twelve species). *Eucalyptus regnans* is known as Mountain ash in Victoria but Swamp gum in Tasmania!

This may not help in some ways, but it may draw the attention of woodworkers to some of the pitfalls and hopefully assist in correctly naming a species.

A useful guide to naming (but not identifying) Australian species is **Australian trees and shrubs – common and scientific names and toxic properties**, edited by Morris Lake, and published by the International Wood Collectors Society. Copies are available in the Library.