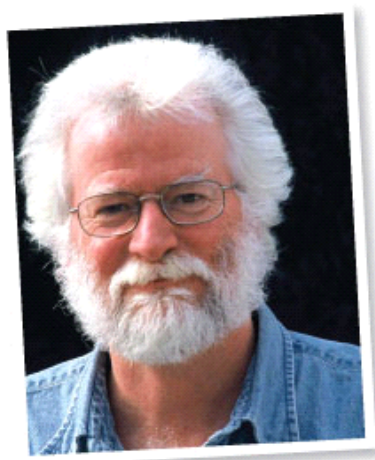


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Trendus Maximus

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What's trending in our collective green mind? From recent industry events, I've gleaned four qualifiers. The first two are no-brainers.

1) Houseplants are staging a strong comeback. They've never really gone away, of course, but the increased interest is wonderful—even though this surge probably won't touch the houseplant craze of 40 years ago, when everybody had pots of something on every horizontal surface.

2) Succulent sales remain juicy. They're in every other trade show booth for good reason. They're tough to kill, indoors or out, even for the blackest thumb. It's hard to say why they've remained hot, but we know whom to thank: Innovative breeders like Terra Nova and mass producers like Altman's and Little Prince of Oregon. Popularity can't happen without attractive forms and consistent availability.

Succulents are so popular, they've drawn imitators from another industry: Plastics. Seriously. Real ones are so maintenance-free, why even bother to make fakes? Sorry, can't answer that. But the phonies are disturbingly good. I had to touch a couple to confirm my suspicions.

The other two are less intuitive:

3) Trade show order-taking has returned. Once a major reason to attend or exhibit, f2f buying gradually yielded to phone, fax and Internet sales. Colleagues and competitors agree it's a thing again, and a welcome one. Deep down, we all have the same favorite plant: The one that's sold before you grow it.

4) Botanical nomenclature is cool. Honest. In the past few months, I've delivered well-received talks on Latin plant names to two very different groups. Most recently the audience was a convention of fruit and vegetable growers—hardly a bunch of hard-core Latin lovers.

I asked, "Who likes scientific nomenclature"? One hand went up. Hmmm ... okay. "Who actively dislikes it"? Nearly unanimous. Hmmm, again. With six presentations to choose from, that's borderline masochism. But there they were. Of course, I'd drawn the coveted after-lunch slot. Maybe they hoped to catch a nap. I may not have changed minds or hearts, but they stayed put, took notes, laughed at the jokes and applauded at the end. What more can a speaker ask?

I hope this message came through: Latin names become way clearer and more interesting when translated, not just memorized. Etymology rules. Daylily is easy to remember, but so is Hemerocallis once you know it means “beauty for a day,” which is how long each flower lasts, so it’s a daylily in both tongues.

Eponymous names are a fascinating subset. What’s in a name? A window into the past. The weed Siegesbeckia was named by Linnaeus, patron saint of Latin binomials, in dishonor of a rival botanist. Muhlenbergia honors homeboy Heinrich Muhlenberg, whose academic, clerical and horticultural careers occurred here in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Deschampsia was inspired by unlucky Louis Deschamps, surgeon/naturalist on a ship sent in 1791 to find another French vessel gone missing. The mission failed spectacularly. Most of the crew took ill and died. Captured by the Dutch in Indonesia, Louis spent 10 years cataloguing native flora. When finally freed to return home, he was captured again, by England. His notes and specimens reside in the British Museum. To the victor belong the spoils.

So it begins. People love a good story and there’s one behind every taxon.

Tipping points are tough to pinpoint, even in hindsight. We may never know exactly when a niche became a fad became a trend became a staple. And it’s probably wishful thinking on my part that Latin names will ever be cool, that last-ditch efforts will ever be Ave Marias rather than Hail Marys. But a Latin lover can dream. **GP**

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