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Bad News in Two Languages

John Friel



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Sad news reached me late in May: RIP Dr. Darrel Apps, friend, plantsman and daylily breeder extraordinaire. Darrel left us at the age of 86, gardening and hybridizing right up to the end. Midwestern farm boys are sturdy.

I first met Darrel over 40 years ago when he was Head of Education at Longwood Gardens. He'd also taught at the University of Kentucky and Penn State. After a career that took him across the country and around the world, he moved back to Wisconsin in 2007.

Over the years I got to know him as a generous host, visiting his homes, gardens and meticulously organized breeding plots, first in Pennsylvania and then New Jersey. He graciously allowed me to take photographs for the catalogs of my employers.

Darrel is famed worldwide for his specialty, hemerocallis, especially best-sellers like Happy Returns, which he should have patented. He collaborated with Centerton Nursery in New Jersey on the punnily named Happily Ever Appster series.

But his encyclopedic plant knowledge went far beyond that genus. His gardening chops were impeccable: Mostly by himself, he planted and maintained glorious borders.

Fittingly, those plantings were also educational. Somewhere in his beds, thriving, there was always something unfamiliar. I was happy to host him once at a party at my home, where he diplomatically refrained from commenting on my own gardening chops, which were and are decidedly peccable.

I met Darrel (and learned of his demise) through Dale Hendricks, founder of North Creek Nurseries and Green Light Plants, who always called him "The Good Doctor."

Dale said, "A more generous, well-humored and influential mentor is hard to imagine." Another mutual friend, Neil Diboll of Prairie Nursery, recalled gratefully how The Good Doctor encouraged him in difficult days.

"After three years of knocking my head against the wall trying to get people to appreciate native flowers and grasses, I was seriously considering quitting. Darrel to the rescue! This gentleman from Longwood extolled my efforts. I was

in shock. Most of the world still considered my plants ‘weeds.’ Not Darrel Apps.”

That was at a Perennial Plant Association symposium in 1985. The world has caught up: Neil will speak at this year’s symposium in Des Moines.

Darrel introduced Dale to the International Plant Propagators’ Society (since rebranded, with “Production” replacing “Propagators”) in the 1980s. I last saw The Good Doctor at an IPPS conference in Delaware in 2018, where we both gave presentations—his on breeding, mine on nomenclature. Our paths hadn’t crossed since 2009, when he came to Saint Louis to accept the PPA’s Award of Merit.

Over lunch at IPPS, Darrel said, “I’m so mad at the taxonomists! Linnaeus said, ‘We must simplify things so people can communicate’ and here they’re doing the exact opposite!”

Which brings me to this column’s focus before I heard the news: Nomenclature.

It irks me that my beloved PPA sells T-shirts—two years in a row now—with plant names printed improperly on them. The names are spelled correctly, but there are rules about Latin plant and animal names. A species is a binomial, i.e., genus name followed by specific epithet, e.g., *Pycnanthemum muticum*, 2025’s Perennial Plant of the Year. Both parts of the binomial should be italicized; the only capital letter should be the P in *Pycnanthemum*. Unfortunately, the shirts’ lettering is all caps, no italics. It’s a good-looking garment, with an appealingly retro font like an old seed catalog, but it’s wrong. As a past President of the PPA, and former Chair of the erstwhile Nomenclature Committee, it’s painful to look at. I couldn’t possibly wear one without editing it with a red Sharpie, which would not improve its, or my, appearance.

It gives me no pleasure to chide the PPA, or to end on a sour note, but then, this is a eulogy of sorts, and those are seldom rainbows-and-unicorns things.

Yes, proper nomenclature has been an eye-roll topic for many people since Linnaeus formalized binomials. But shouldn’t an association that’s successfully positioned itself as a family of knowledgeable, even expert, horticulturists set a better example?

So there’s my rant, my picked nit, my First World Problem du jour. I’m confident that The Good Doctor would agree.

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