

# Orchid Names Explained

--Carol Bayles

## Species

Orchids can be divided into two broad groups: species and hybrids. Orchid species occur naturally and go by a unique, two-name classification system designed by Carl Linnaeus in the mid-1700s. The names are in Latin and are called the genus (plural is genera) and species (or specific epithet but no one uses that term). When written, the genus name is capitalized, the species is not and both are written in italics: *Cattleya mossiea*. Often the genus name is abbreviated to one letter or a few letters, as *C.* for *Cattleya*, *Epi.* for *Epidendrum* and *Phal.* for *Phalaenopsis*.

Within each genus there may be dozens, if not hundreds, of species. The species name may indicate place of origin (*costaricensis*, from Costa Rica), the person who found the orchid (*besseae*, for Libby Besse), a characteristic of the orchid (*coccinea*, for red) or honor an individual (*garayi*, for Leslie Garay). The species name often tells you something about the plant. Some plants in a species may exhibit certain characteristics recognized by assigning a subspecies, often called a variety (var.) or form (f.) name. The variety name begins with a lower-case letter, is in italics and is the third name in the sequence. The flowers of *Phragmipedium besseae* are typically red, but a variant with yellow flowers has been named *Phragmipedium besseae forma flavum*, or just *Phragmipedium besseae f. flavum*. The characteristics of a subspecies will often pass to seedling progeny but not necessarily. *Coerulea* forms, for instance, often revert back to a more normal form. If a selfing, the chances are better to stay true, but even *alba* or *semi-alba* forms often revert.

Naturally occurring hybrids can be found in the wild. Once identified and named, the name of these plants includes an 'x' between the genus and species names (e.g., *Cattleya x hardyana*). The entire name, except the 'x', appears in italics. *Cattleya x hardyanais* a natural hybrid of *Cattleya dowiana* var. *aurea* and *Cattleya warscewiczii* and is found in Colombia. It is important to note that this name is used only for those plants that are wild-collected. The original artificial cross was in 1896 and named *Cattleya Hardyana*. Note the capitalization of the H. While the instance of *Cattleya x hardyana* found in Columbia is from the variety *aurea* of *dowiana*, any other natural hybrid of any form of *C. dowiana* and *C. warscewiczii* would keep the same name.

## Hybrids

Orchid hybridization has been occurring for over 150 years and the naming gets more complicated. Hybrids are no longer referred to by the genus-species name. For hybrids made between two species within a genus (intrageneric), the genus name is still used but instead of a species name, a group or grex name can be assigned by the breeder. The grex name applies to all the progeny of that cross and all future crosses using the same parents, including reciprocal crosses; it begins with a capital letter and is not in italics. When *Calanthe triplicata* was crossed with *Calanthe sylvatica*, all progeny were given the

name *Calanthe Dominyi*, after John Dominy, who made this first cross in 1856. Sometimes the grex is not named and the plant will just be known by its parents.

When buying a plant with a grex name without a cultivar name, or with a cross name, it is a seedling and you don't really know what you are getting. That is part of the fun and serious hobbyists buy groups of seedlings (or whole flasks) in the hopes of getting something special.

hybrid and a species is referred to as a complex hybrid. We now also have many intergeneric hybrids (crosses between two or more genera). In this case, a new genus name is created by the breeder as discussed in a previous newsletter. This article is now available on the STOS website. This genus name is still capitalized and written in italics. It is usually followed by a grex name.

## **Cultivars**

One or more plants from a cross may have exceptional qualities and can be assigned cultivar (cv) names to distinguish them. Cultivar means 'cultivated variety'; it was selected and cultivated by humans. The cultivar name comes after the grex name, is capitalized and set within single quotes: *Paph.* Olivia 'Casa Luna'. There are no commas within this name. The name is assigned by the AOS or another orchid organization. In some cases of mass cloning, especially on Phals from SE Asia, a "Trade Name" is assigned and cannot be found in any public record as the cross may never have been registered. If the name is just Phal Lollipop, and you can't find any information on the cross, it is a "Trade Name".

Cultivar characteristics may not be passed to seedling progeny, but all vegetatively propagated progeny of a cultivar (divisions, keikis, mericlones) will have the same qualities and bear the same name. This permits hobbyists to know exactly what to expect from a plant they purchase bearing a cultivar name. However, there are documented cases of "sports" being produced by cloning techniques, where one in several thousand might have a different colored flower. This could be a plus or a minus.

Cultivars may also be selected from a species that shows a mutation or other special characteristic: *Paphiopedilum appletonianum* 'Seascape'. You can also have a cultivar of a variety (subspecies) and all vegetatively propagated progeny will have the same characteristics and will still be considered a 'species', not a hybrid.

## **Problems and Exceptions**

Not everyone follows the rules. Many websites dispense with the italics. However, the genus always comes first, and the species name is the only one not capitalized. If the first name after the genus is capitalized and not in quotes, then it is a grex (progeny). Any part of the name that is capitalized and in quotes it is the cultivar name. Cultivars should always be in quotes. Often a plant is identified only as a

cross between two other plants. There are likely many plants from this cross but if yours is exceptional, you may have a chance to give it a cultivar name.

There are times when the genus name is not capitalized or italicized. If you are not talking about a specific plant but about a group of plants (often the genus will end with an s) it is not capitalized or italicized. For example, "laelias are placed in the cattleya alliance because they are closely related to *Cattleya labiata*, the type species for cattleyas." The letters at the end of a name --such as AM/AOS and HCC/AOS indicate an award (which was also covered previously and is in the same article on the STOS website). These awards may be given to both species and hybrids. An award imparts prestige and, generally, a higher price. The award designation is part of the official name and carries through any vegetative propagation. There is more involved in naming orchids but this will get you pretty far. More information can be found in the references below.

### References:

This article is based mostly on the following two references:

Basics of Orchid Names

<https://www.aos.org/orchids/additional-resources/basics-of-orchid-names.aspx>

Orchid Names: The Basics by David Mellard, Ph.D.

<https://www.atlantaorchidsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Orchid-Names-The-Basics.pdf>

A complete listing of intergeneric hybrid names and the appropriate abbreviation (as of July 2020) is available at <https://midamericanorchids.org/education>. Note you can have the list sorted by name or by abbreviation. This does not include species or intrageneric hybrids.

The World Checklist of Selected Plant Families (formerly the Kew Monocot List) has a searchable database that allows you to find information about the accepted name and synonyms for orchid species and natural hybrids.

[http://apps.kew.org/wcsp/prepareChecklist.do?checklist=selected\\_families%40%40100090420121954649](http://apps.kew.org/wcsp/prepareChecklist.do?checklist=selected_families%40%40100090420121954649).

Keeping track of 150,000 orchid hybrid names is the job of the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) in the United Kingdom. The RHS maintains a database of hybrid names along with the parents, the hybridizer, the date of registration, and other pertinent information. This searchable database is available at <https://apps.rhs.org.uk/horticulturaldatabase/orchidregister/orchidregister.asp>. Note you can only search by parentage or grex.

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