

姜 Jiāng

According to an old story, a legendary ruler once tasted hundreds of plants to learn which could heal and which could harm.

When he was poisoned, a sharp-leaved herb with a spicy root saved his life.

In gratitude, the ruler gave the plant his own family name, and it has carried that name ever since, known as the herb that brings life back to the dying.

Etymology: Chinese name “姜” (Jiāng), derived from the legendary Emperor Yan’s surname, given to the plant that once saved his life.

Alpini

In the 1600s, an Italian doctor from Venice travelled to Egypt to study unfamiliar plants. He was one of the first Europeans to describe coffee and bananas in detail.

Later, a Swedish scientist named a whole group of fragrant roots after him, to honour his work with medicinal herbs.

Etymology: from the Latinized surname Alpini, honoring Prosper Alpinus (1553–1617).



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

释迦果 Shìjiā guǒ

When this fruit reached China centuries ago, people compared its shape to the head of a monk or the top of a pagoda. It arrived through trade and missionaries from the South Seas and soon took root in the warm coastlands.

Etymology: *Shìjiā guo* (释迦果) means “fruit of Shakyamuni,” for its resemblance to the Buddha’s head.

Annona

The name comes from an old Caribbean word, *anón*, meaning “fruit.” People in the Americas were already growing and eating it thousands of years before Europeans arrived. Later, botanists kept that native word as the name for a family of soft, sweet trees found throughout the tropic.

Etymology : from Taíno *anón*, meaning “fruit.”



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

鷹爪花 Yīngzhǎo huā

Its petals curve backward like the claws of a bird of prey — a shape seen as a sign of strength and nobility.

In southern China, people give it many names: some call it the “five-clawed orchid,” others the “eagle’s claw flower.”

Etymology: Yīngzhǎo huā (鷹爪花) means “eagle claw flower,” named for its curved petals resembling a bird’s talons.

Artobotrys

Its name comes from two old Greek words — artane, meaning “to hang,” and botrys, meaning “a cluster of grapes.”

Its flowers and fruits grow on hooked stems that cling to nearby branches, letting it climb like a hanging chain through the forest.

Etymology: from Greek *artane* “that by which something is hung” + *botrys* “a cluster of grapes,” referring to the plant’s hooked inflorescences and hanging fruit.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

秋海棠 Qiū hǎitáng

One story tells of a woman who wept beneath a wall, and where her tears fell, a gentle plant began to grow — its flowers soft as her face, its leaves green on top and red below. Because it blooms in autumn, people came to call it the flower of farewell.

Etymology: *Qiū hǎitáng* (秋海棠) means “begonia of autumn,” named for its blooming season.

Begonia

In the seventeenth century, a French botanist met a colonial governor who loved collecting plants. Later, he named a group of flowering plants after him to honor his enthusiasm for nature. The name remains today, shared by many species with uneven petals.

Etymology: named by French botanist Charles Plumier in honor of Michel Bégon (1638–1710), a French colonial administrator and plant collector.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

番蝴蝶 Fān húdié

It first came from far across the ocean. Its red-orange petals spread like the wings of a butterfly. People called it “foreign butterfly,” a name that remembers both its color and its distant home.

Etymology: Fān húdié (番蝴蝶) means “foreign butterfly,” named for the flower’s petals that resemble fluttering butterflies.

Caesalpinia pulcherrima

This plant’s name honors an Italian botanist and physician who helped shape the first systems of plant classification. Its second name means “most beautiful,” chosen for its vivid red-orange flowers that shine like fire under the tropical sun.

Etymology: the genus name honors Andrea Cesalpino (1524–1603); the species name *pulcherrima* means “most beautiful” in Latin.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

西瓜 Xīguā

In China, this fruit has been known for over a thousand years, though no one can say exactly when it arrived.

Ancient records called it “寒瓜 (hán guā)” for its cooling nature, or “胡瓜 (hú guā)” to mark its foreign origin from the Western Regions.

Etymology: Xīguā (西瓜) means “western melon,” for its introduction from the western of China.

Citrullus

The name comes from Latin and is connected to the word for citrus, once used for fruits with thick skins and a fresh scent.

It was first given to a kind of cucumber, but later used for another fruit — round, striped, and full of sweet water.

Etymology: from Latin *citrus*, “citron,” with the diminutive suffix *-ullus*, meaning “small citrus-like fruit”; originally used for cucumber-like plants.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

菊花 Júhuā

This flower was named for when it blooms — in the ninth lunar month, late autumn, during the festival called Chóngyáng.

Its old name “鞠” was linked to the word “掬,” meaning “to hold in both hands,” describing how its petals gather tightly together.

Etymology: Júhuā (菊花) combines “jú,” from “鞠,” meaning “to gather or hold in both hands,” to describe its dense, clustered petals.

Chrysanthemum

Its name comes from two old Greek words. Early European botanists gave it this name because its early blooms shone bright and yellow, like pieces of sunlight.

Etymology: from Greek *chrysos* “gold”, *anthemon* “flower,” referring to its golden color.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

茶 chá

In early Chinese texts, this plant was called “苦荼 (ku tú).”

People boiled its leaves as food or drink long before the character “茶 (chá)” was invented. Over centuries, the sound of “荼” changed in southern dialects, and the new character “茶” appeared, which kept the same meaning.

Etymology: Chá (茶) evolved from the older word tú (荼), simplified in form and sound in southern dialects.

Camellia thea

(syn. *Thea chinensis*)

A Jesuit missionary from Moravia once sailed to the Philippines, collecting and describing strange tropical herbs.

Later, his Latinized name was used by European botanists for a group of evergreen shrubs whose leaves were brewed into a bitter, aromatic drink.

Etymology: *Camellia* honors Georg Kamel (Camellus), a Moravian Jesuit and naturalist; *thea / sinensis* denotes origin “of China.”



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

佛手柑 Fóshǒu gān

This fruit's name comes from its form, the long lobes look like the fingers of a hand. People saw in it a symbol of blessing and kindness, so it's also known as "the Hand of the Buddha."

It is often placed on altars or offered as a gift to bring peace and good fortune.

Etymology: *Fóshǒu gān* (佛手柑) means "Buddha's hand citron," named for its finger-shaped lobes resembling a blessing gesture in Buddhist symbolism.

Sarcodactylis

Its name refers to the fruit's unusual shape — a cluster of long, curved segments that spread like a hand.

Etymology: the varietal name *sarcodactylis* comes from Greek *sark* "flesh" + *dactylos* "finger," referring to the fruit's segmented, finger-like form.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

兰 Lán

This flower has been praised for more than a thousand years. Poets admired it for its quiet fragrance, calling it “the gentle one that hides in the valley.”

By the Song dynasty, new types had spread across the land, and the word came to mean not only a fragrant herb, but the spirit of noble friendship and virtue.

Etymology: *Lán* (兰) originally referred to fragrant herbs; later it became the name for cultivated orchids symbolizing purity, elegance, and integrity.

Cymbidium

The name of this genus was formed from two Greek words — *kymbē*, meaning “boat,” and *eidos*, meaning “form.”

It refers to the shape of the flower’s central petal, curved like a small boat that seems to cradle its fragrance.

Etymology: from Greek κύμβη (*kymbē*) “boat” + εἶδος (*eidos*) “form,” referring to the boat-shaped central petal.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

栀子 Zhīzi

In ancient China, people named this plant after a drinking vessel called “卮 (zhī),” whose round shape resembled its fruit.

Over time, the character was written as “栀,” keeping the sound but changing the form.

Etymology: *Zhīzi (栀子) comes from “卮,” an ancient wine vessel, as the fruit resembles its shape.*

Gardenia jasminoides

This plant was named by a Swedish botanist to honor a Scottish naturalist who studied life in colonial America.

Its second name means “like jasmine,” because of its white flowers and strong fragrance.

Etymology: *named after Alexander Garden (1730–1791); jasminoides means “jasmine-like.”*



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

朱槿 Zhūjǐn

In ancient Chinese writings, red-flowered plants were often called “朱槿 (zhū jin).” Another poetic name, “扶桑 (fúsāng),” described the mythical tree where the sun was said to rise, a symbol of light and vitality.

Etymology: *Zhūjin* (朱槿) means “red *hibiscus*,” with “朱” denoting its bright crimson color.

Hibiscus rosa-sinensis

The genus name is recorded by Dioscorides, a Greek physician of the first century, who used it to describe a mallow-like plant. While the species name meaning “the rose of China.” However it is neither a true rose nor originally from China.

Etymology: from Greek *ἱβίσκος* (*hibiskos*), used by Dioscorides for a mallow plant; *rosa-sinensis* means “the rose of China.”



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

金丝桃 Jīnsī táo

The Chinese name describes what the eye sees first — clusters of bright yellow filaments shining like threads of gold. Each bloom opens like a small sun, and its stamens spread outward in all directions. Because of this, people simply called it “golden-thread peach,”

Etymology: *Jīnsī táo* (金丝桃) means “golden-thread peach,” named for its yellow stamens that look like fine threads of gold.

Hypericum

People once believed this plant could guard their homes from harm. They hung it above images and doors for protection, and from that belief its name was born — a name meaning “above the image.”

Etymology: from Greek ὑπέρ (hyper) “above” + εἰκών (eikon) “image,” referring to the ancient practice of hanging the plant above images to ward off evil.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

鸢尾 Yuānwěi

Its long, sword-like leaves stand tall and narrow. Ancient people thought they looked like the tail feathers of a kite.

That comparison became the origin of its Chinese name, linking the image of flight to the shape of its leaves.

Etymology: *Yuānwěi* (鸢尾) means “kite tail,” named for its long, sword-like leaves that resemble the tail feathers of a kite.

Iris

It was named after a figure from Greek mythology — the messenger who connected heaven and earth.

Her name also means “rainbow,” which matches the wide range of colors found in this flower.

Ancient stories say it first grew where the goddess’s feet touched the ground.

Etymology: from Greek Ἰρις (Iris), the goddess of the rainbow and messenger between heaven and earth;



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

紫薇 Zǐwēi

In China, this flower shares its name with a star once called *Ziwei xīng*, known today as the North Star.

The star was seen as a symbol of nobility and authority, so the same name was given to a flower often planted in palace gardens.

Etymology: *Ziwei* (紫薇) comes from *Ziwei xīng* (紫微星), the North Star in Chinese astrology, symbolizing nobility and longevity.

Lagerstroemia

In the eighteenth century, a Swedish merchant worked for the East India Company and sent plant specimens to a botanist named Carl Linnaeus.

The botanist later used the merchant's surname for a new group of flowering trees. That is how this genus received its name.

Etymology: named by Carl Linnaeus after Magnus von Lagerström (1696–1759), a Swedish merchant and director of the East India Company.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

马缨丹 Mǎyīngdān

In China, people named it after a decoration once used on warhorses.

When the flower blooms, its round cluster of red and yellow petals looks like the bright tassels tied to a horse's head in ancient times.

Etymology: *Mayīngdān* (马缨丹) means “horse-tassel flower,” named for its flower clusters that resemble the red tassels once tied to horses’ heads.

Lantana

The name of this plant came by resemblance. It was borrowed from another, unrelated species — *Viburnum lantana* — because both share clusters of tightly packed blossoms.

Etymology: from *Viburnum lantana*, the Latin name of an unrelated plant with similar clustered flowers; the name was later applied to this tropical genus.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

龙爪花 Lóngzhǎo huā

Its flowers grow in clusters at the top of a tall stem, each one curving backward like the claws of a dragon.

Etymology: *Lóngzhǎo huā* (龙爪花) means “dragon claw flower,” named for its petals that curve backward like the claws of a dragon.

Lycoris aurea

Its name joins two old words from different languages: One comes from a figure in Greek stories, known for her beauty in the light of dusk. The other simply means “golden,” describing the color of its flowers that shine like evening sunlight.

Etymology: *Lycoris* is from Greek mythology, the name of a woman associated with twilight and beauty; *aurea* means “golden” in Latin, describing the flower’s color.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

玉兰 Yùlán

It comes from what people noticed first — how it looks and how it smells.

The flowers are white and smooth like jade, and their scent reminds people of orchids. By combining these two impressions, the name represents purity and grace.

Etymology: *Yùlán* (玉兰) means “jade orchid,” named for its white petals like jade and fragrance like orchids.

Magnolia

In the eighteenth century, a botanist named a new group of flowering trees after another scientist who changed how plants were classified. The man’s idea of grouping species by their natural similarities became the foundation of modern botany.

Etymology: named by Charles Plumier (1703) and formalized by Carl Linnaeus, in honor of Pierre Magnol (1638–1715).



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

杨梅 Yángméi

Its fruit was said to look like the seed of a willow tree and taste like a plum. For that reason, people combined the two words — “willow” and “plum” — to name it.

Etymology: *Yángméi* (杨梅) joins “yáng,” from “willow,” describing the shape of the fruit, and “méi,” from “plum,” referring to its sour-sweet flavor.

Lagerstroemia

Its name joins two old words — one from Greek, once used for a sweet-smelling shrub, and one from Latin, meaning “red.” Together they describe a plant known for its fragrance and for the bright color of its fruit.

Etymology: from Greek μυρίκη (*myrikē*), meaning “fragrant shrub,” and Latin *rubra*, “red,” referring to the color of the fruit.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color

莲

Lián

In old Chinese, one word was used for the fruit and another for the leaves and flowers. Over time, the two words merged into one, naming the same plant. Because it rises clean from the mud, people saw it as a sign of honesty and purity — even its sound matches the word for integrity.

Etymology: *Lián* (莲) originally referred to the fruit, while *Hé* (荷) described the flower and leaves; the two terms later merged.

Nelumbium

It was taken from the Sinhalese word *nelum*, the local name for the same flower. Early botanists kept the sound almost exactly the same, letting a word from the tropics take root in Western science.

Etymology: from Sinhalese *nelum*, meaning “lotus,” directly adopted into Latin by early botanists with little change in pronunciation.



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color



Harvard Library – Botanical Illustrations: Chinese Plants:
45 drawings in water-color