

What You Always Wanted to Know about Registration but Were Afraid to Ask

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Whenever I find myself discussing the importance of registering plant names, I am asked about the meaning of some of the acronyms related to the subject. After one such discussion, I decided an article on the *ICBN* and the *ICNCP*, and their impact on registration, would be in order.

Long before there was an American Hosta Society, biologists recognized the need for a standard method of taxonomy. *Taxonomy* is defined as “the classification of organisms in an ordered system that indicates natural relationships.”¹ These natural relationships are based on similarities of structure or origin.

When they discover a new plant in the wild, scientists write learned articles about whether it is a new species, a variety of an existing species, or a cross between species or plants within a species. They also discuss the similarities and differences of flower parts compared to other varieties, the existence of a glaucous layer, the plant’s relative geographic isolation and other issues that help define a plant’s relationship with other plants. Sometimes their work, if accepted by the scientific community, alters the previously published taxonomic hierarchy by adding a new species, splitting or adding a genus, or some other alteration.

Any such change in the hierarchy is guided by the *International Code of Botanical Nomenclature (ICBN)*, which sets forth the rules for naming and classifying plants. **Table 1** shows the taxonomic hierarchy for hostas, using *Hosta plantaginea* as the species example.

Very early on, botanists, especially botanical taxonomists, recognized that people were beginning to experiment with inter-specific crosses (crosses between species), and that, as a result, the number of these crosses would increase. Therefore, there would be a need for a practical, easily understood and internationally acceptable naming scheme that would allow botanists throughout the world to be certain they all were talking about the same plant.

In 1862, the first step in this process was made in a letter by Swiss botanist Alphonse de Candolle, who expressed the need to reserve Latin names for species and to use only non-Latin names (sometimes known as *fancy* names), such as ‘Bijou’ or ‘Rainbow’, for garden forms. This was a common, traditional and ancient practice, and de Candolle urged that it should be made the only practice.²

Table 1.

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|---------------|----------------------------------|
| Kingdom | Plantae – Plants |
| Subkingdom | Tracheobionta – Vascular plants |
| Superdivision | Spermatophyta – Seed plants |
| Division | Magnoliophyta – Flowering plants |
| Class | Liliopsida – Monocotyledons |
| Subclass | Liliidae |
| Order | Liliales |
| Family | Hostaceae – Lily family |
| Genus | <i>Hosta</i> – plantain lily |
| Species | e.g., <i>H. plantaginea</i> |

In 1866, attendees at the International Botanical Congress of London suggested that such international congresses should deal with matters of nomenclature, and in 1867 the International Botanical Congress of Paris officially accepted a document that formed the basis for the present *International Code of Botanical Nomenclature*. This original draft contained a section which stated: “Seedlings, half-breeds (*metis*) of unknown origin and sports should receive from horticulturists’ fancy names (*noms de fantaisie*) in common language, as distinct as possible from the Latin names of species or varieties. When they can be traced back to a botanical species, subspecies or variety, this is indicated by a succession of names (*Pelargonium zonale* ‘Mrs Pollock’).³”

This provision survived intact until 1905, when it became increasingly apparent that it was inadequate and there was a call for its expansion. But the coming war halted European progress in this area. Here in the United States, there was a similar drive for the development of additional standard naming procedures, most notably by the American Pomological Society (a group focused on the study and cultivation of fruit). That society’s original naming code dates from 1867, and it was based on the even earlier 1847 “Rules for American Pomology,” developed by the Cincinnati, Massachusetts and Pennsylvania Horticultural Societies.⁴

Although there was much discussion at subsequent international congresses on the subject, nothing much was done in the way of formalizing a code for cultivars until 1948, when the American Society of Plant Taxonomists submitted a group of proposals to the 7th International Botanical Congress.

After that meeting, a committee was chartered to take the 1948 proposals, and the discussion that ensued, and formally draft, correlate and arrange these into a code to be presented at the nomenclature meetings of 1952. This draft, after further revision, became the first official *International Code of Nomenclature for Cultivated Plants (ICNCP)*.⁵ This first version of the *ICNCP* became known as the 1953 *Code* or 1953 *ICNCP*. It has been revised several times, and we are now operating under the 2004 *Code*.⁶

The AHS Registrar makes decisions as guided by the *ICNCP*. For more about what the Registrar does, see my last article (*THJ*, Vol. 37. No. 2, p. 10).

Endnotes

¹ Web Dictionary, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.

² Much of the historical material regarding the *ICNCP*, pre-1952, is extracted, excerpted and updated from an address given by W. T. Stearn, the Secretary of the International Committee on Horticultural Nomenclature and Registration at the opening meeting on September 7, 1952.

³ *Lois de la Nomenclature botanique*; Article 40, International Botanical Congress of Paris, (1867).

⁴ Downing’s *The Horticulturist and Journal of Rural Art* 2: 273-275 (1847), 430-431 (1848); cf. Hume, *Camellias in America* 222 (1946).

⁵ The code is published by the International Society for Horticultural Science (ISHS), Leuven, Belgium (in *Acta Horticulturae* 647, February 2004) and was adopted by the International Union of Biological Sciences Commission for the Nomenclature of Cultivated Plants and is recognized worldwide.

⁶ There have been 7 editions of the *ICNCP* with the following years of first effect: 1953, 1958, 1961, 1969, 1980, 1995, and 2004.