Loquerisne linguam latinam? (Do you speak Latin?)
by Nancy Nies

IT WAS DURING A CONVERSATION LAST APRIL WITH CLYDE Golden, concerning the identification of a certain wildflower, that I experienced an “Aha!” moment — more about that later — which planted the seed for this article. Clyde’s explanation satisfied my curiosity not only about the plant’s name, but also about the Latin itself — what it said about the flower and what word it had given to English. Making these connections would help me remember the plant and something about it, as well as an English word new to me. The experience spurred me to research the descriptive species names of some of the plants I saw in bloom on Kern CNPS field trips this spring. Here, I’ll give some highlights of three of those trips, as well as the results of my research on the plants’ names — a lesson in botanical Latin for beginners.

On our April 16 field trip to the Carizzo Plain with BLM botanist Denis Kearns, we climbed Caliente Ridge, which afforded an impressive view to the south — in the distance, the blue mountains of the Caliente Range, and, closer in, entire hillsides turned a vibrant yellow by Monolopia lanceolata (hillside daisy). (The species name refers to the plant’s “lance-shaped” leaves. From...
is related to the Latin term for “to bring together,” which gives us the English words “confere” and “conference.” So, we might think of the small, bright-yellow flowers as gathering together to confer with one another. Another plant we spotted that day was *Salvia columbariae* (chia), a sage whose form is reminiscent of a “columbarium,” or “dovecote,” with its many recesses — each of which, we might imagine, awaits a tiny dove. Incidentally, the columbine — whose flower is thought to resemble a bird — also gets its name from the Latin word *columba* (dove).) At Bitter Creek we also sighted *Erysimum capitatum* (western wallflower), whose species name refers to the fact that its yellow to orange flowers form a knob-like head. (English has common head-related words starting with “cap” — “captain,” “capital,” and “cap” itself, for example. Most English speakers would likely know the meaning of the verb “decapitate,” but few would know that the related adjective, “capitate,” means “forming a head.”)

When botanist Pam De Vries gave Kern CNPS members a guided tour at Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge on April 23, we enjoyed panoramic views of the Carizzo Plain, San Andreas Fault, and Temblor Range. We also saw many blooming plants, including some with picturesque names. One was *Eriophyllum confertiflorum* (golden yarrow). Its species name tells us it that its flowers are “crowded,” or “pressed closely together,” and...
Principe, on the Nature Conservancy’s Toll House Ranch in the foothills above Caliente, east of Bakersfield. The highlight was seeing a spectacular display of the lovely, lily-like *Triteleia laxa* (Ithuriel’s spear), which created wide swaths of bluish-lavender on hillside after hillside. (As you might expect, its species name is associated with the words “lax” and “loose,” indicating that “the parts are distant from each other, with an open, light . . . arrangement,” according to one reference text.)

Another sighting on that trip was a healthy clump of *Mimulus florisflorus* (many-flowered monkey-flower), with its many small, yellow flowers. (One botanical lexicon defines *florisflorus* as “profusely flowering”; another as “free-flowering; abounding in flowers; flowering for a long season.”) Near a rock outcropping decorated with Native American pictographs, we saw a large colony of the rare *Diplacus pictus*, formerly *Mimulus pictus* (calico monkey-flower), its blooms white with maroon veining. (This is Kern CNPS’s logo flower, which appears on the banner of the Mimulus Memo. It was not until I researched “pictus,” however, that I saw its relationship to “pigment” and “picture,” finally understood its meaning of “painted, brightly marked,” and realized how appropriate it was to find the plants growing close to pictographs!)

And now, back to the “Aha!” moment that led me to look into the Latin names of some of the flowers I saw last spring, and to write about them. I had asked Clyde to identify a single bloom I had seen in the White Wolf Grade area. It had five white petals, each with a purple spot. Clyde told me it was *Nemophila maculata* (mountain five-spot), explaining that *maculata* — “maculate” in English — meant “spotted,” just as its commonly-used opposite, “immaculate,” means “spotless”! (I have since discovered that the related French botanical term *maquis* — the equivalent of our “chaparral” — originated in Corsica, where groups of shrubs were seen as spots on the mountainsides.)

I look forward to making more botanical discoveries, as well as related linguistic ones. Learning even a little of another language — Latin, in this case — can have many benefits. Una lingua numquam satis est. (One language is never enough.)

References:
*Botanical Latin*, by William T. Stearn; *Gardener’s Latin* by Bill Neal; *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, by Eric Partridge; *Kern County Flora*, by Maynard Moe; and *A Field Guide to the Plants of the San Emigdio Mountains Region of California*, by Pam De Vries.

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