

I recently wrote an article about *All America Selections* announcing the new winners for the 2016. Shortly after it appeared in the Kearney Hub, I received an email from a reader inquiring about the word *cultivar* and its meaning. Receiving such a message made me realize the importance of understanding the often times confusing terminology used by horticulturists. As plant breeding techniques continue to evolve, the industry also continues to create new terminology. As a horticulturist, I realize it is important that I attempt to use the right terms in the right ways.

For most gardeners, January is the planning month for the new gardening season. If you are like me, almost daily we find ourselves perusing the many new seed catalogs arriving in our mail. While involved in such activity, it is not uncommon to encounter confusing terminology. Allow me to try to clear one misconception.

One might ask, the difference between a cultivar and a variety. Often, these two terms seem to be used interchangeably. Although there are some similarities, there are definite differences between the two. One similarity is they both appear as part of the scientific name of a plant. They always follow the genus/species name; however, this is where the similarities end.

The word cultivar means a cultivated variety; thus, a cultivar is selected and cultivated by humans. Although some cultivars can occur in nature as plant mutations, most cultivars are developed by plant breeders and are called hybrids. A first generation hybrid occurs when a breeder selects two pure lines (plants that would produce identical offspring when self-pollinated) and cross pollinates them to produce a new plant that combines desirable characteristics from both parents. One major thing to remember is if new plants are grown from the seeds of a cultivar, rarely, if ever, do the new plants develop true-to-seed. True-to-seed simply means the offspring is genetically the same as the parent. To cultivate a true-to-seed type offspring (a clone) from cultivars, one would have to be vegetatively grown, such as from cuttings, grafting or tissue cultures.

In nature, when a population of plants within a species differs in some significant way from other members of that species, (perhaps in flower color) it might be deemed a variety. Variety plants are identical to other members of the

same species, except they might have white flowers instead of pink flowers. In this situation, the genus/species name of a plant is followed by a third name, the variety. For example, there is a white flowering redbud tree found in nature. Its scientific name is *Cercis canadensis* var. *alba*. The word *alba*, derived from Latin, means white. If one were to germinate seeds from this variety, most would yield white flowering red bud trees. Plants grown from variety seeds generally produce true-to-seed.

Both the cultivar name and variety name follow the genus/species name of a plant when listed in seed catalogs; however, each is listed differently. A variety is always written in lower case and italicized. It generally has the abbreviation var. (for variety) preceding it.

The first letter of a cultivar is capitalized and the term is never italicized. Cultivars are also surrounded by single quotation. For example 'Lavender Twist' is a weeping form of redbud. The twigs of this cultivar have a slight zigzag pattern, and its branches are significantly contorted. When listed, it would appear *Cercis canadensis* 'Lavender Twist'.

In short, a cultivar is a plant that is produced and maintained by horticulturists but does not produce true-to-seed; whereas, a variety is a group of plants within a species that has one or more distinguishing characteristics and usually produces true-to-seed.