



VARIETIES, CULTIVARS, AND HYBRIDS

When shopping for native plants, you may notice variations on how plants are named. What do these variations mean and which ones are best for supporting wildlife? Here are a few tips for understanding name terms and how they show up on plant tags.

The first thing to know is that every plant has both a common name and a scientific name. The scientific name is always in the language of Latin or Greek, and has two parts: a genus and a species. The common name is the name known to the general public. Ex: Oregon iris is a common name that's been given the scientific name of *Iris tenax*.

WHAT IS A "VARIETY"?

A "variety" is when a natural change occurs within a native plant population. For example, in Oregon we have a native tree called the Ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*). Within our specific Willamette Valley ecoregion (the ecosystem of the Portland-Vancouver metro area) a slightly different version of the tree has developed naturally and has been named "Willamette Valley" Ponderosa pine (botanical name: *Pinus ponderosa* var *benthamiana*). This means that at some point in time, one of the traits of the tree naturally shifted to create a slightly different version of the tree. Notice how the botanical name includes "var," which is short for "variety."

WHAT IS A "CULTIVAR"?

The term "cultivar" is short for "cultivated variety" and refers to a plant being modified by humans. Many cultivars are grown by cuttings and grafting (attaching a cutting of one species to another species so that they join together over time).



Native:
Ponderosa pine - *Pinus ponderosa*
Photo: nwconifers.blogspot.com



Native Variety:
Willamette Valley Ponderosa pine -
Pinus ponderosa var *benthamiana*
Photo: evenoaksnative nursery.com

For example, a native small shrub called Kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) has been modified by humans to have different bloom colors, bloom times, leaf color, and other traits considered more appealing to shoppers. Kinnikinnick cultivars include *Arctostaphylos* 'Howard McMinn,' *Arctostaphylos* 'Green Supreme,' and many others. Note how the second part of the name is in single quotation marks, indicating the cultivar's name.



Native:
Kinnikinnick - *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*
Photo: oregonflora.org



Native Cultivar:
Kinnikinnick 'Green Supreme' - *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi* 'Green Supreme'
Photo: watershednursery.com

WHAT IS A "HYBRID"?

A hybrid refers to the cross-pollination of two different plant species or varieties. This can occur naturally when two species grow in the same range but is often the result of intentional cross-breeding by humans to bring out the "best" traits of each of the parent plants. Like cultivars, the enhanced traits can vary widely, from larger blooms to greener foliage, etc.

When shopping at plant nurseries, most of the hybrids you see will be produced by humans. Hybrids are given a name that includes an "x," but are sometimes named in a style similar to cultivars (see above). For example, a hybrid of our native Douglas spiraea (*Spiraea douglasii*) is Pyramid spiraea, whose botanical name is written as *Spiraea x pyramidata*.



Native:
Douglas spiraea - *Spiraea douglasii*
Photo: Dana Edmund, nativeplantspnw.com



Native Hybrid:
Pyramid spiraea - *Spiraea x pyramidata*
Photo: xeraplants.com

I WANT TO MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICE FOR WILDLIFE. WHICH IS THE BEST OPTION: CULTIVARS, VARIETIES, OR HYBRIDS?

It's important to note that there are many different cultivars, varieties, and hybrids, many or all of which do have some value to habitat but very few of which are being researched to determine how the changes are impacting wildlife.

We recommend planting true native species because their benefits to wildlife are well known. For instance, our native Red-flowering currant is a proven nectar source for hummingbirds. If a cultivar is created with a larger bloom, we don't know if hummingbirds are still able to reach the nectar inside the bloom. Similarly, if the bloom color changes to white, it might go unnoticed by hummingbirds, who are attracted to shades of purple, red, and yellow.

To determine if a plant is a true native species, look it up on the Portland Plant List or consult your Backyard Habitat site report. Some varieties you'll find at nurseries are true natives (ex: Willamette Valley ponderosa pine – *Pinus ponderosa* var *benthamiana* and Red elderberry – *Sambucus racemosa* var *arborescens*) although most are not. Only true native varieties appear in the Portland Plant List, and it doesn't include any cultivars or hybrids.
