Profile: Scientific Names

Why use scientific names? It's so there can be common communication. People have an obsession for naming things they like or are obsessed with, and they feel their own names are better than what other people call the thing.
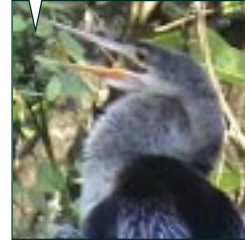
Thus, popular and widespread wildlife have many local or common names. For example, the Lesser Scaup *(Aythya affinis),* which is hunted extensively, has over 40 common names. That is a recipe for confusion. So for each species, there is one uniform, worldwide official name, and that's the scientific name.

Some scientific names are already part of common usage: *Anhinga, Phragmites, Tillandsia, Polystachya* orchid, *Hypericum.*

However, too many people worry about the "correct" way to pronounce those uniform names and don't use them because they think that they will look stupid if they say the name wrong.

Relax! The good news is there is NO correct way to pronounce them!

The goal is to communicate with others, and as long as people know what is being talked about, the names can be pronounced any way and they will be just as correct as any Ph.D. botanist's pronunciation.

Scientific names are not a spoken language. Sometimes called Latin names, this is incorrect because many biological names can be based on Greek, a mix of Greek and Latin, or the local name of a plant in the language of whatever people live in the area the plant was discovered.

There is *Lobelia tupa*, the genus *Lobelia* named after Matthias de Lobel and the species *tupa* from the Mapuche Indian name of the plant in southern Chile. Nothing to do with Latin, so why use the rules of Latin to pronounce it?

They can also be based on people's names (*nelsonii*), place names (*caroliniana*), even anagrams (*Podranea* is just the letters of the related *Pandorea* rearranged).

There is a spiny shrub called *Damnacanthus*, meaning "damn spines!" no doubt named by the taxonomist after he had stuck himself one too many times handling the specimens. Taxonomists, the guys who name these things, do have a sense of humor.

Another reason not to bother trying to force a botanical name to follow the rules of Latin pronunciation is no one really knows how ancient Romans spoke. Latin teachers in New England pronounce words differently than Latin teachers in Texas or Hong Kong. And there aren't any original Romans around to say which is correct.

Why imitate a bunch of dead guys? People don't speak modern English like Shakespeare or modern Spanish like Cervantes. If English speakers from Boston, West Virginia, London, Australia, India, and Jamaica pronounce the same words differently, why should botanical names have to sound exactly the same?

One reasonable pronunciation suggestion to help communicate is to look at the name and pronounce each root separately, just like we do with Rhododendron: break it up into *rhodo* and *dendron* and say each one as its own word. After all, they are two words that mean 'rose tree.'

Most people call *Pittosporum* "pi-TOS-por-um," but break it up into the two roots *pitto* and *sporum* meaning "pitch-seed." Most people pronounce *Acacia melanoxylon*, "mel-an-OX-ee-lon," but since it is the blackwood acacia, and the name refers to the color of the wood, it is *melano* (black) and *xylon* (wood), or "me-lan-o-ZYE-lon."

Both ways are acceptable while neither is correct. Both have reasonable justifications for use, one because of common usage and the other because of the roots of the word. It all comes down to personal preference.

So to repeat, there is absolutely, positively NO correct or official way to pronounce scientific names. The goal is to be understood so one person knows what the other person is talking about.

That being said, following are some "common usage" pronunciations of things that might be seen in Corkscrew. These are guides/suggestions, not rules.

portions excerpted from J. L. Hudson Seeds

Speech bubbles: "Isn't that a Snake Bird at the end?" · "I think it's a Water Turkey." · "You ant brains! It's an *Anhinga anhinga*." · "My friends just call me Walter."

Scientific name	Guide to pronunciation	Common name
Acer rubrum	AY-sur ROO-brum	Red Maple
Anacardiaceae	an-uh-kar-dee-AY-see-ee	sumac family
Asclepias incarnata	uh-SKLEE-pee-us in-kar-NAY-tuh	Swamp Milkweed
Aster carolinianus	ASS-tur kair-oh-lin-ee-AY-nus	Climbing Aster
Callicarpa	kal-ih-KAR-puh	Beautyberry

Scientific name	Guide to pronunciation	Common name
Coreopsis	kore-ee-OP-siss	Tickseed
Crinum americanum	KRY-num uh-mair-ih-KAY-num	Swamp Lily
Dichromena colorata	dye-kroe-MEE-nuh kull-ur-AY-tuh	White-top Sedge
Epidendrum rigidum	ep-ih-DEN-drum RIDGE-ih-dum	Rigid Epidendrum orchid
Ficus aurea	FYE-kus AW-ree-uh	Strangler Fig
Gaillardia aristata	gay-LAR-dee-uh ar-iss-TAY-tuh	Blanket Flower
Helenium autumnale	huh-LEE-nee-um aw-tum-NAY-lee	Sneezeweed
Hibiscus coccineus	hye-BISS-kiss cock-SIN-ee-us	Scarlet Hibiscus
Hypericum densiflorum	hy-PEER-ih-kum den-sih-FLOOR-um	St. John's Wort
Ipomoea alba	ip-uh-MEE-uh AL-buh	Moonvine
Ipomoea purpurea	ip-uh-MEE-uh pur-PUR-ee-uh	Morning Glory
Iris hexagona	EYE-ris hex-uh-GO-nah	Blue Flag Iris
Liatris spicata	lye-AY-triss spy-KAY-tuh	Blazing Star
Myrica cerifera	mur-EYE-kuh sur-IFF-ur-uh	Wax Myrtle
Osmunda regalis	oz-MUN-duh ruh-GAY-liss	Royal Fern
Parthenocissus quinquefolia	par-theh-no-SISS-us kwin-kwih-FOE-lee-uh	Virginia Creeper
Pinus eliotii	PYE-nus el-ee-OT-ee-eye	Slash Pine
Pontederia cordata	pon-tuh-DEER-ee-uh kor-DAY-tuh	Pickerelweed
Quercus virginiana	KWURK-us vur-jin-ee-AY-nuh	Live Oak
Salix caroliniana	SAY-licks kar-un-lin-ee-AY-nuh	Coastal Plain Willow
Taxodium ascendens	taks-OH-dee-um as-SEN-dens	Pond Cypress
Taxodium distichum	taks-OH-dee-um dis-STICK-um	Bald Cypress
Tillandsia fasciculata	till-AND-see-uh fas-sik-yoo-LAH-tuh	Stiff-leaved Wild Pine
Tillandsia usneoides	till-AND-see-uh uzz-nee-oh-EYE-deez	Spanish Moss
Toxicodendron radicans	tok-sih-koe-DEN-drun RAD-ih-kanz	Poison Ivy
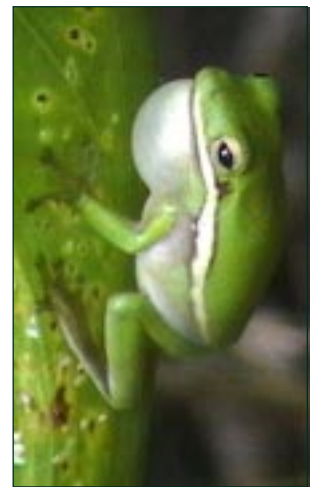
Rana grilio	RAH-nuh GREEL-ee-oh	Pig Frog
Mycteria americana	mik-TER-ee-uh uh-mer-uh-KAN-uh	Wood Stork
Hyla cinera	HIGH-lah sih-NARE-uh	Green Treefrog
Strix varia	STRICKS vuh-REE-uh	Barred Owl