



# *Rhexifolia*

versus

# *Rhexiifolia*

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PLANT NOMENCLATURE  
RUN AMOK?

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## ABSTRACT

The International Botanical Congress governs plant nomenclature worldwide through the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature. In the current code are very specific procedures for naming plants with novel compound epithets, and correcting compound epithets, like *rhexifolia*, that were incorrectly combined. We discuss why *rhexiifolia* is now preferred.

## KEY WORDS

*Castilleja*, International Code of Botanical Nomenclature, ICBN, IBC

## NOMENCLATURE

USDA NRCS (2004)

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**Y**ou may be surprised to see in the next article on propagation of Indian paintbrush (Luna 2005) the use of the name *Castilleja rhexiifolia* Rydb. (Scrophulariaceae). Isn't it supposed to be *rhexifolia*? Wasn't that the way Rydberg (1900) originally published it? Yes! And that's the way it is printed everywhere. So, why is it now *rhexiifolia*?

Ever since Linnaeus devised the system of naming species with binomials in the mid-1700s, nomenclaturists have debated the correct name for each plant. The International Botanical Congress, of which the 16th met in St Louis in 1999, is the recognized decision-making body for plant names. Each congress updates the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature—therefore, we are now using the latest or “Saint Louis Code” (see IAPT 2003). The objective of this code is to formulate sensible rules that provide more stability to plant nomenclature. The difficulty is that the code resembles the US tax code in complexity: it is self-referential to the extreme and therefore often internally conflicting, and the process of eliminating ambiguity through the layering of more provisions seems, at least to the non-nomenclatural world, self-defeating. But it does work, and in the hands of experts, quite well. The code sets procedures that enforce the correction of some mistakes and prohibit the correction of others, explains how to formulate nomenclature correctly to avoid mistakes in the first place, and conserves names that are known to be incorrect if correcting them would cause even more grief in the taxonomic world. For example, the genus *Carya* (Nuttall 1818), the hickories (Juglandaceae), has been conserved against an older name with nomenclatural priority, *Hicorius* (Rafinesque 1817), because *Carya* is in such widespread use that adoption of *Hicorius* would be disruptive.

With respect to orthography (that is, writing words with proper letters according to standard usage), chapter 7, article

60.1 specifies that—with a few exceptions—the original spelling of a name is to be retained. *Castilleja rhexiifolia*, however, presents one of these exceptions, since novel compound epithets (the part of a taxonomic name specifying a subordinate unit within a genus) must be correctly combined (recommendation 60.G.1), and existing incorrectly combined epithets must be corrected (article 60.8). For this Indian paintbrush, the epithet is formed from *Rhexia* (a genus in Melastomataceae), to which is appended *folia* to give us “leaves like *Rhexia*.” When correctly combining these elements in Latin, one must drop the “a” from *rhexia*, and use a connecting “i” to yield *rhexiifolia*. So *rhexiifolia*, not *rhexifolia*, is the correct orthographic variant for this epithet.

As Weakley (2005) points out in the previous article, nomenclatural changes are inevitable. The process of putting a continuously variable array of plant life into a stable, consistent, coherent system of nomenclature is complex, and at times, frustrating. Although the current system may sometimes seem arbitrary, capricious, and ambiguous, this work-in-progress helps us stay firmly rooted in our Linnaean tradition and better understand the diverse nature of the plants we work with.

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