

# More Garden Terms Decoded

by Kathleen Curthoys, Fairfax Master Gardener

Gardeners have a language all their own. Our garden terms can be scientific or fanciful, exacting or quaint, often historic and sometimes mysterious. Here's a look at how a few curiosities came to be in our vocabulary. Let's dig into what the records reveal, through science and stories, about these garden terms. These descriptions come from scientific sources and common references but may not be the sole explanations for linguistic origins. They, like an overgrown garden, can have many tangled roots and shoots.

This is a continuation of my story on Garden Terms Decoded from the November update of this website.



photo: Bryn Mawr College

**Herbaceous:** As the name implies, this wide-ranging description applies to plants without woody stems and those that will die back to the ground when their growing season ends. They can be annual or perennial. Examples include tomatoes, many vegetables, grass and many common flowering plants such as marigolds and zinnias. The earliest evidence cited for the use of the word herbaceous, derived from Latin, is from the middle 1600s by physician and writer Sir Thomas Browne, according to the Oxford English Dictionary.

**Hoe:** The name came into Middle English as *howe* from the French *houe*, related to the Germanic *houwan*, "to hew."

**Horticulture:** The art and science of growing cultivated ornamental plants, vegetables and fruits. The word comes from the Latin words "hortus," meaning garden plants, and "cultura," which is tilling the soil.

**Lawn:** The meaning of the word has evolved over time. The Middle English "launde" and the Old French "lande" indicate clearings or open spaces in between wooded areas. By the early 18th century, it was used to mean an area of grass that was kept mowed. The term "lawn tennis" appears by the late 19th century.

**Magnolia:** The genus name, *Magnolia*, is named in honor of a botanist of the 17th century, Pierre Magnol, whose fondness for the tree led him to transplant it to Europe. In 1703, French botanist and explorer Charles Plumier named the genus and family (Magnoliaceae) after Magnol. Other botanists used *Magnolia* in descriptions of other species of flowering trees.

**Monocot/Monocotyledon:** This class of plants has one seedling leaf, or cotyledon, at the time of germination. Examples include corn, onions, grasses and sedges.

**Nightshades:** The mysterious sounding name in fact refers to a large family of plants including commonly known vegetables you may have in your kitchen right now. The edible nightshades include tomatoes, eggplants, potatoes and bell peppers. But other relatives—the toxic ones—might be more at home in the Addams Family. The origin of the term nightshade is debatable, but one theory is that it comes from the Old English *nihtscada*, meaning night and shade, and may refer to these plants' preference for flowering at night.

**Potager:** Pronounced pow-tuh-jay or pah-tuh-jay, it is a kitchen garden whose name comes from the French “jardin potage” or soup garden. Potagers have appeared not only in France but in many cultures as part of cottage gardens, country homes and large estates. Typically, the potager garden may feature a mix of vegetables, fruits and herbs, often laid out in an organized pattern.

**Scarecrow:** The English word has been in use since the mid-1500s, though the concept dates at least as far back as ancient Egypt, where people would chase birds into nets suspended from frames. In medieval Europe, straw-filled sacks with gourds for heads were displayed upright to resemble people, taking the place of children who were needed for farm tasks other than chasing birds. Scarecrows, along with jack o’lanterns, were used to ward off creatures that might do harm, as well as evil, lending the scarecrow a sinister aspect. Immigrants to America brought with them the practice of raising formidable-looking scarecrows and trying variations with a variety of materials.

**Sedge:** This is a plant that can easily be mistaken for a grass, but it isn’t technically. The stems have a triangular shape as you look down on the length of them. You may hear gardeners say “sedges have edges.” There are dozens of species of these perennials in the Cyperaceae family, many notable for their intriguing flower structures.

**Succulent:** The term that refers to many diverse drought-resistant plants comes from the Latin word “sucus,” which means juice, sap or full of juice, so the reference alludes to “juicy plant.” Succulents are low maintenance, good at storing water and tend to have thick leaves. The wide variety includes jade plants, aloe plants, agave, cacti and sedum.

**Weed:** The word appears with various spellings all the way back to Old English, with roots (so to speak) from Old Saxon and Old High German. It has long referred to a plant growing where it wasn’t wanted. “A weed is a flower in the wrong place,” said Sir Edward Salisbury, a former director of London’s Kew Gardens.

**Wellington boot:** The story, according to English Heritage, is that Arthur Wellesley, then the Viscount Wellington and later a war hero, asked his shoemaker for a boot he could wear with trousers, which were often replacing breeches in the early 1800s. The boots became known as Wellingtons, named for the fashionable duke who was well known even before his victory at Waterloo. Eventually the boots were made with rubber or “gum” and a version of them was worn by soldiers in World War I. The boots became widely popular for practical uses such as gardening, and gardeners still swear by their Wellies today.

**Wheelbarrow:** The wheel part is clear enough, and barrow is said to come from “Barewe” or “bearwe” in Old English in the early 14th century, indicating a flat, rectangular frame with projecting handles for carrying a load. The similar term hand-barrow referred to a container without a wheel that would have been carried by two people. But now we know better.

#### **Bonus trivia**

Here’s one from out of left field, and for gardeners, it’s hard to resist this: ORD. These letters are the airport code for Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport, one of the world’s busiest. But the letters don’t quite align with “O’Hare,” do they? The airport’s earlier name was Orchard Field, built in Orchard Place, originally a rural 19th century community with farmland and orchards. ORD is for “orchard” (ORchard). The next time you’re sitting in the traffic jam of airliners on the tarmac, relax and dream of apple blossoms along the great lake.

### References

- [Lawns](#), Online Etymology Dictionary
- [6 Facts You Didn't Know About Nightshades](#), Colorado State University
- [The Story of Scarecrows](#), C.T. Ward, Frederick County Master Gardener, University of Maryland Extension
- [Wheelbarrow](#), Online Etymology Dictionary