Down-To-Earth Words

Richard Lederer

In 1970, the first Earth Day began a "grassroots" effort to recognize each year the fragility of the imperiled planet we are all riding.

Our fertile English language is cultivated by agricultural comparisons in expressions like *a vintage year, a grass roots campaign, a budding movie star, gone to seed, seedy, cut and dried, farm team, reap the benefits, mow down, separate the wheat from the chaff, cut a wide swath, crop up, feel one's oats, farm out, weed out, plow into, the grass is always greener on the other side,* and *a needle in a haystack*.

Here, unearthed, is a bountiful crop of common agricultural words and phrases:

- Among the down-to-earth figures of speech that are planted in our language is the word *broadcast*, which first meant "to broadly cast seed on the ground by hand" and in 1922 took on its modern meaning with the emergence of radio.

- The lines in a worried forehead resemble the grooves in the earth made by a plow. We describe such a forehead as *furrowed*.

- Like well-farmed land, the fertile minds of those who read this book are carefully tended and yield a bountiful harvest. We say that such people are *cultivated*.

- A harrow is a cultivating farm implement set with spikes or spring teeth that pulverize the earth by violently tearing and flipping over the topsoil. That's why we identify an emotionally lacerating experience as *harrowing*.

- A mentally talented child is often identified as *precocious*, from the Latin *praecox,* "ripe before its time."

- European peasants, forbidden to cut down or pick from trees, were allowed to gather wood and fruit blown down by the wind, a bounty that required little effort on the part of the lucky recipients. By extension, we today use a word that describes an unexpected stroke of good luck: *a windfall.*

- In bygone days, the Old English *math* meant “mowing.” Nowadays a word that means “results, effects, or consequences” is an *aftermath*.

- The arduous job of hoeing long rows in uncooperative terrain gives us *a hard (*or *tough*) *row to hoe*, an expression that means “a difficult task.”

- Late spring frosts or pests can kill an aborning leaf or flower before it has a chance to develop. When we terminate a project in its early stages, we say that we *nip it in the bud.*

- Hay is made by setting mown grass out in the sun to dry. When we want to make the most of an opportunity, we *make hay while the sun shines*. Anyone who has ever tried to cut the tightly stretched baling wire used to bind a bale of hay knows how ornery the stuff can be. When someone or something behaves in an uncontrolled manner, we say that he, she, or it goes *haywire*.

- In the word *towhead, tow* descends from an Old English word that means “flax.” A towhead is a youngster—usually male, but not necessarily so—with white or pale yellow hair the color of flax. Avoid confusing *tow* with *toe,* as in this newspaper photo caption: “Linda Tinyon clutched her toe-headed son during the storm.” Even worse: “Linda Tinyon clutched her two-headed son during the storm.”

A popular toast rings out, *Here’s mud in your eye*, which originally meant “May you find soft, rich, dark, and moist soil that will be thrown up as specks of mud as you plow it.”

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An Anthology of Flowery Words

Richard Lederer

An anthology is a collection of literary, musical, or artistic works gathered in a single setting. The Greek forebear is *anthologia*: *anthos,* "flower" + *lego,* "gather" = "a gathering of flowers." Our English language is made more exquisite and colorful by an anthology of flowery words:

- The English used to call the yellow, shaggy weed a "lion's tooth" because the jagged, pointed leaves resemble the lion's snarly grin. During the early fourteenth century, the lion's-tooth plant took on a French flavor and became the *dent-de-lion,* "tooth-of-the-lion." Then it acquired an English accent: *dandelion.*

- In Greek mythology, the blessed spent their afterlife in the Elysian fields, which were carpeted with a flower the Greeks named *asphodelos*. Over time the word gained an initial *d* and eventually became *daffodil*. *Lid off a daffodil* is a palindrome.

- Also from ancient mythology we inherit *narcissus,* an attractive and usually white or yellow flower. The name echoes the ancient Greek myth of the handsome Narcissus and the doomed Echo. Echo was a beautiful nymph who fell madly in love with an exceedingly handsome Greek boy, Narcissus, who would have nothing to do with her. So deeply did the nymph grieve for her unrequited love, that she wasted away to nothing until nothing was left but her voice, always repeating the last words she heard.

  The fate that befell Narcissus explains why his name has been transformed into words like *narcissism* and *narcissistic*, "pertaining to extreme self-love." One day Narcissus looked into a still forest lake and beheld his own face in the water, although he did not know it. He at once fell in love with the beautiful image just beneath the surface, and he, like Echo, pined away for a love that could never be consummated.

- *Daisy* was created in Old English from the poetical "day's eye." The flower is indeed a metaphor waiting to be born, with its sunburst center, its radiating white petals, and its sensitivity to the progress of the day, opening during the sunny hours and closing in the evening and extinguishing its brightness. The poet Geoffrey Chaucer, without benefit of any linguistic manual, referred to the sun as “the day’s eye, or else the eye of day.”

- The unusual double bulbs of the orchid bear an uncanny resemblance to male gonads. That’s why the beautiful and expensive flower receives its name from the Greek word for “testicle,” *orkhis.* More than two thousand years ago, Pliny the Elder observed, “Mirabilis est orkhis herba, sive serapias, gemina radice, testiculis simili.” Even if you don’t know Latin, I’m confident that you can deduce the meaning of the first and last parts of that statement. Pliny believed that just holding an orchid in one’s hand would expand sexual desire.

- The *tulip’*s cup-shape “mouth” may remind you of “two lips,” but that is not how the flower got its name. The Dutch borrowed *tulip* from the French (*tulipan*), who purloined it from the Turks (*tulbend*), who noted that the shape of the flower reminded them of a turban.

- Many members of the *geranium* family exhibit long, thin, tapering fruits that resemble the beak of a bird. That’s why the Greeks named the flower *geranion,* “little crane.”

- *Iris* was originally the Greek word for both “rainbow” and for the goddess of rainbows. who left a trail of color as she delivered messages. Later her name was applied to the colorful flower and to the thin, circular structure in our eyes that gives them color.

- Of the various plants associated with the Christmas season, the *poinsettia* possesses the most intriguing history etymologically. A Mexican legend tells of a penniless boy who presented to the Christ Child a beautiful plant with scarlet leaves that resembled the Star of Bethlehem. The Mexicans named the plant *Flor de la Noche Buena* (“Flower of the Holy Night”) Dr. Joel Roberts Poinsett, the first U.S. minister to Mexico, discovered the Christmas flower there in 1828 and brought it to this country, where it was named in his honor in 1836. The flaming poinsettia has become one of the most popular of Christmas plants—and one of the most misspelled and mispronounced (*pointsettia, pointsetta, poinsetta*) words in the English language.

- Another botanical Christmas item is the pear tree. In the seasonal song "The Twelve Days of Christmas," have you ever wondered why the true love sends not only a partridge but also an entire pear tree? That's because in the early French version of the song the suitor gave only a partridge, which in French is rendered as *une pertriz.* A 1718 English version combined the two — "a partridge, *une pertriz*" — which, slightly corrupted, came out sounding like "a partridge in a pear tree." Ever since, the partridge has remained proudly perched in a pear tree.

- The *rose* holds a special significance in our bouquet of flowery language, which is abundant with rose idioms that often seem to be inspired by the flower's pleasant scent and beauty. *Take time to smell the roses* is to appreciate what is often ignored. If you come out *smelling like a rose,* you have emerged from a difficult situation with your reputation intact. A similar optimism perfumes *a bed of roses, everything's coming up roses, rose-colored glasses,* and *a rosy outlook*. Then there's Gertrude Stein's epiphanous "Rose is a rose is a rose."

- The *tulip*'s large, cup-shaped "mouth" may remind you of "two lips," but that's not how the blossom got its name. The Dutch borrowed *tulip* from the French (*tulipan*), who purloined it from the Turks, who noted that the shape of the flower reminded them of a turban.

- A garden of women's first names bloom from flowers—Acacia, Amaryllis, Blossom, Buttercup, Camellia, Cherry, Dahlia, Daisy, Danica, Flora, Gardenia, Hazel, Heather, Holly, Hyacinth, Iris, Ivy, Jasmine, Laurel, Leilani, Lily, Lotus, Magnolia, Marguerite, Marigold, Myrtle, Orchid, Pansy, Peony, Petunia, Poppy, Posey, Rhoda, Rose, Rue, Shoshanna, Susannah, Veronica, Violet, Willow, Yasmin, Yolanda, and Zenobia.

While most perennials flower, they are plants, not flowers. My eighty-and-over *generation* (jocularly "a ration of genes") has been dubbed *old timers, the silent generation, senior citizens, golden agers, retirees,* and — ew! — *fuddy-duddies, duffers, old goats, geezers, coots, codgers, bags, biddies,* and *farts*. I propose the sobriquet *perennials* because we're still blooming!

May you not read ‘em and weep, but, rather, weed ‘em and reap. May your garden yield a fruitful bounty, and may you learn, in the words of poet Robert Louis Stevenson, to “judge each day not by the harvest you reap but by the seeds you plant.”