TECHNICAL NOTE

Scientific or common names?

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Although there are no strict rules about using either common names or scientific names for plants and animals, I strongly recommend the scientific names. Common names are generally easier to remember, because they're usually in modern English and they're often names that're already familiar to the writer. However, there's an over-riding disadvantage; common names differ from place to place. A plant that everyone knows as cottonbush on the Goldfields might be bloodbush in the southern wheatbelt, white mulla mulla in the northern wheatbelt, and cottonbush again in the Gascoyne. To add to the confusion, the name cottonbush refers to a different plant altogether in parts of the northern wheatbelt, and a bloodbush, in pastoral parts of Central Australia and the Goldfields, is a species of woody shrub that's unknown in most of the wheatbelt. In the Dampier area, bloodbush is something else again.

Broad-brush names like bluebush, samphire, broombush or tea tree might refer to any of several hundred, broadly related species across the country. Even at the same locality, there might be several species with the same common name. In the Kalannie area, for example, the name bluebush is used for any succulent member of the genus *Maireana*, but is often restricted to the small-leafed bluebush (*Maireana brevifolia*). Unrelated plants, such as *Enchylaena tomentosa, Sclerolaena diacantha* and *Didymanthus roei*, which superficially resemble *Maireana brevifolia*, are also called bluebush at times. On the other hand, there are members of the *Maireana* genus which're recognised by some residents as bluebush, but not by others. For some people and some species, this recognition might be confined to a particular time of year, e.g. during flowering or fruiting, or when a particular environmental condition is present, e.g. during waterlogging or when the leaves turn bluish.

All this might be quite acceptable for a communication that's purely local, but there're very few communications where you can be so sure of the audience. To avoid possible

confusion, it's safest to use scientific names most of the time. An exception is when you aren't sure what species you're dealing with. For example, say you've been planting the broombush species *Melaleuca hamata* and *Melaleuca atroviridis* along a drainage line, but have lost track of which seedlings were used for a particular patch. Rather than simply guess the species, a better course would be to leave it as 'broombush'. If readers need more detail, they'll just have to visit the field site and identify the plants themselves.

Scientific names usually have two words, e.g. *Melaleuca lateriflora.* The first (the genus name) begins with a capital letter. The second word (the species name) doesn't – even when it's obviously derived from a place name or from someone's surname. [Although this's a small thing, it looks very, very amateurish and rings alarm bells with agency people when species names are misspelt or capitalised.] Both words are Latinised, i.e. they're not necessarily real Latin, and can be based on words from many languages, including English, but they've been modified to conform to Latin grammatical rules, e.g. *Acacia* victoriae, *Acacia coolgardiensis*.

Another convention is that both the genus and the species names should be written in *italics*. In the days before word processors, when changing the font to italics was a major job, it was acceptable to underline the name instead. You still come across this version sometimes in type-written documents, but it's not very common. Once again, ignoring the conventions altogether can make a report look amateurish, no matter how professionally the actual content's been arranged. This highlights the need for careful editing.