

The Names You Know, the People You Don't: *The Plant People!!!*

Derek P.S. Tustin

Yes I like my fish, and yes I really like my Rainbowfish, but as most of you are aware, I have a passion for aquatic plants as well. It's not just fish that are named in honour of people, but plants as well. Unfortunately, more is made of an expedition that discovered a new species of fish, or the person who studied that fish, than is made of those who have made botanical discoveries. But, they deserve some recognition as well, so here are some brief biographies of some of those honoured by name in the aquatic plants we keep.

Adam Afzelius (1750 – 1837)

One of the more uncommon species of *Anubias* is *Anubias afzelii* which was first collected by Adam Afzelius in Sierra Leone. It was the first species of *Anubias* discovered and the first to be described.

Adam Afzelius was born in Larv, Sweden in 1750. It is not recorded where he attended school, but as he was made a teacher of oriental languages at Uppsala University in Sweden in 1777 and then in 1785 made a demonstrator of botany at the same institution, it can be assumed that he studied at a university in Sweden, possibly the aforementioned Uppsala.

It is further known that around 1792 he spent some time on the west coast of Africa, and it is probable that he first gathered the plant that was later named *Anubias afzelii* (1856). After spending some time in Africa, he returned to Sweden and resumed his position of demonstrator of botany at Uppsala University.

He is known for his botanical writings, but he is also known as the autobiographer of Carolus Linneaus who was the author of *Systema Naturae*, the foundation of zoological classification.

His brother, Johan Afzelius, was a professor of chemistry at Uppsala University, and another brother, Pehr Afzelius (later Pehr von Afzelius after being made a noble) was a professor of medicine, also at Uppsala University.

There are several species of plants and animals that have "afzeli" or "afzelii" as the species name, but it is difficult to determine which of the Afzelius brothers they were named in honour of. However, we do know that the aquatic plant we are familiar with, *Anubias afzeli*, and the *Afzelia* genus of trees were named in honour of Adam Afzelius. Given the botanical nature of the items listed below it is likely that they were also named in his honour

Named in honor of a member of the Afzelius family;

- (aquatic plant)
- *Afzelia* genus (tree - Pod mahogany, Lucky bean tree)
- *Afrithelphusa afzelii* (freshwater crab)
- *Drypetes afzelii* (tree)
- *Garcinia afzelii* (tree)
- *Hymenostegia afzeli* (tree)
- *Nephtyitis afzelii* (tropical plant)



Anubias afzelii

Dr. William Griffith (1810 – 1845)

Some people pursue science as a career and others fall into it as a hobby. Born on March 4th, 1810 in London, England, William Griffith excelled in school and was apprenticed to a surgeon. At the age of 19 he began attending classes at the University College and as part of his medical studies, took several courses relating to botany, including courses in medical botany. While his career would always be that of a surgeon, his passion was botany.

He finished his formal studies in 1832 and was soon sent abroad to India in the employ of the East India Company. In addition to formal positions as a surgeon, he undertook several botany related endeavours. He assisted in a study which compared the botanical properties of a geographic area of India to the tea growing areas of China and based on the similarities came to the conclusion that the area of India in question would be suitable for growing tea. This of course was economically advantageous to the East India Company.

Throughout his life in India, Dr. Griffith undertook several formal and informal expeditions where he collected botanical specimens. In 1837, during one of these expeditions through a disturbed section of India, all contact with Dr. Griffith ceased. It was assumed by the government that he had been killed and was subsequently announced as such. A few months later, ragged and exhausted from his travels, he reappeared, and went on to detail his adventures in collecting in the dangerous region.

For two years, from August 1842 to August 1844, he was in charge of the Calcutta Botanical Gardens where he also lectured to medical students. Unfortunately six months later, on February 9th, 1845, Dr. Griffith succumbed to a rapid onset of a parasitic liver disease and died one month shy of his 36th birthday.

After his passing plants that he had collected were sent to the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, England, and it was found that he had collected in excess of 12,000 samples. In terms of contributions towards aquatic horticulture, he was one of the first to study both *Salvinia* and *Azolla*, and a species of crypt, *Cryptocoryne griffithii*, was named in his honour.

A sampling of plants named in honour Dr. William Griffith;

- (aquatic plant)
- *Aglaonema griffithii* (foliage plant)
- *Arisaema griffithii* (cobra lily)
- *Cephalotaxus griffithii* (coniferous shrub)
- *Ceratostigma griffithii* (flowering shrub)
- *Durio griffithii* (tree)
- *Euphorbia griffithii* (flowering plant)
- *Fraxinus griffithii* (tree)
- *Larix griffithii* (coniferous tree)
- *Vanilla griffithii* (vanilla orchid)



Cryptocoryne griffithii

Louis-Marie Aubert du Petit-Thouars (1758 – 1831)

The interesting thing about many of the different botanists who have been honoured with plants named after them is that any aquatic plants are usually a minor consideration when compared to the other botanical work they have done. Louis-Marie Aubert du Petit-Thouars is best remembered as being the first to describe the *Bulbophyllum* genus in *Orchidaceae* (the orchid family). *Bulbophyllum* has 1803 species and is the third largest genera in the entire plant kingdom.

Born on November 5th, 1758 in the Anjou region of France, Louis-Marie Aubert du Petit-Thouars was a son of an aristocrat family. Not much has been written on his early life, but considering that he was from an aristocrat family, and considering that he was literate enough to author at least three books during his life, we can assume that he was relatively well educated.

The French Revolution began in 1789 and sometime during either that year or the following, Louis-Marie Aubert du Petit Thouars was arrested and imprisoned. After being jailed for two years, he was exiled to Madagascar in 1792. There he began collecting plants from Madagascar and the neighbouring islands of L'île de France (today known as Mauritius) and L'île de Bourbon (now known as La Réunion).

He spent ten years in the region prior to him being permitted to return to France. When he returned, he brought over 2000 plants with him, and in recognition of his work was elected as a member of the prestigious Académie des Sciences in 1820. Most of his collection was given to the Muséum de Paris but some ended up at the aforementioned Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, England.

He passed away in Paris, France at the age of 72 on May 12th, 1831.

At least 24 different species of plants and animals have been named in honour Louis-Marie Aubert du Petit-Thouars. A sampling includes;

- *Blyxa aubertii* (aquatic plant)
- *Cidaris thouarsii* (urchin)*
- *Cirrhopetalum thouarsii* (orchid)
- *Elaphoglossum aubertii* (fern)
- *Eucidaris thouarsii* (sea urchin – “slate pencil urchin”)
- *Flabellum thouarsii* (Antarctic coral)
- *Jasminocereus thouarsii* (cactus)
- *Moyinga thouarsii* (tree – “elephant leg tree”)
- *Polygonum aubertii* (flowering vine)



Blyxa aubertii

* Remember back in April I wrote about Dr. Louis Agassiz? This urchin was named by him in honour of Louis-Marie Aubert du Petit-Thouars.

Brother Justin Gillet (1866 – 1943)

For all those who became botanists due to inclination or curiosity, some followed a different path. Next is someone who is remembered for his botanical accomplishments not through interest, but through necessity.

Born on June 18th, 1866 in Belgium, Justin Gillet was not a child of privilege, but rather came from a farming family in the Ardennes. As was common from people from such farming backgrounds, he received little formal education, although it is known that he did have some primary education.

It appears that around 1886 and at 20 years of age, Justin Gillet entered Jesuit novitiate studies. (Novitiate studies are a period of time, usually two years in the case of the Jesuits, prior to taking vows as a member of a religious order). Two years later, in 1888, he took his vows and was appointed to the College of Nursing at the University of Namur in Namur, Belgium. During his four years there and as part of his duties, he studied plants, specifically those with medicinal properties.

In 1893 he was sent as part of a Jesuit mission to the Lower Congo. When they arrived they quickly realized food would be a major problem, and as a partial solution (and given his experience both as the son of a farmer and his experience with medicinal botany) Brother Gillet was tasked to start a garden. Seven years later, he was relocated to Kisantu where he once again began a garden. But this wasn't a garden such as we have in our backyards, but rather a massive undertaking involving the construction of dams, irrigation systems, plots devoted to the acclimatization of Europe fruits and vegetables to the African environment, and plots devoted to the improvement of native plants.

As the years passed he had exceptional success in improving varieties of lettuce, tomatoes, bananas, other fruits and vegetables and even a tropical grass that is now grown on gardens across the region. As time permitted he also developed an interest in local plants, including orchids.

What started as a garden quickly grew into the first botanical garden in Africa, and now is amongst the largest on the continent.

Brother Gillet remained there as the administrator of the gardens until his passing on July 22nd, 1943 at the age of 77.

The only aquatic plant associated with Justin Gillet is the somewhat rare *Anubias gilletii*. A sample of plants named in his honour are;

- *Anthonotha gilletii* (flowering plant)
- *Citropsis gilletiana* (citrus tree)
- *Coria gilletii* (tree)
- *Ensete gilletii* (banana tree)
- *Musa gilletii* (banana tree)
- *Zanthoxylum gilletii* (tree)



***Anubias gilletii* (Arrowhead anubias)**

So there you have it; a university professor, a surgeon, an aristocrat and priest. A wide variety of backgrounds and a wide range of work. The majority of their discoveries are related to terrestrial plants, but some of their discoveries relate to and are used in our hobby, and we are richer for what they discovered.