Clarkia pulchella Pursh, pinkfairies
Lewisia rediviva Pursh, bitter root

These two plants were named for the two leaders of the Corps of Discovery, following a process botanists have developed for describing and naming new species.

Frederick Pursh (1774-1820), the first botanist to work on Lewis’ specimens, described and named these two plants a few years after the expedition. In doing so, he followed the standard process of modern botanical binomial nomenclature initiated in 1753 with the publication of Species Plantarum by the Swedish botanist Carl von Linne, or Linnaeus as in the latinized version of his name. Linnaeus proposed to assign two names to plants, the first part for the genus and the second for the species.

Commemorative names related to places and people may be given to genus and species. Not surprisingly, new genera often bear the name of people who contributed to the history of botany, hence Pursh’s choice for Lewisia and Clarkia. Both parts of scientific names (genus and species) have Latin endings that could be masculine, feminine or neuter, but they must be the same gender.

"Lewis and Clark as Naturalists" website
http://www.mnh.si.edu/lewisandclark/index.html?loc=/lewisandclark/home.html
Clarkia pulchella and Lewisia rediviva are assigned feminine endings, and here Pursh followed another botanical rule that plants named in recognition of an individual’s direct contribution to botany are feminine. In addition, the third part of the scientific name tells us who described the species for the first time. In these two cases, it was Frederick Pursh in his Flora Americae Septentrionalis published in December 1813.

Although not always obvious, species names may also carry meanings. Pursh’s selection of pulchella, or “beautiful”, certainly has to do with the purple and white flowers’ elegance and attractiveness. The name rediviva or “back to life” has its own anecdote. Back in Philadelphia, the horticulturist McMahon initially had trouble growing the plant Lewis had brought back as roots; Pursh was able to keep the plant alive for some time, but it never bloomed (Earle and Reveal 2003:188).

337. CLARKIA. Pursh in Linn. soc. trans. v. 11

pulchella I.Clarkia. Pursh l. c.
On the Kooskoosky and Clark’s rivers. M. Lewis. June. v. s. Flowers beautiful rose-coloured or purple. 

Clarkia pulchella in Pursh’s Flora
Photo Smithsonian Institution

"Lewis and Clark as Naturalists" website
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Outside the scientific world, plants are known by one or more common names. The common *Clarkia pulchella* is called pinkfairies, ragged robin and deerhorn clarkia; it is also sold under the cultivar name “purple passion”. Lewis and Clark would sometimes give appellations of their own to plants they were observing for the first time, but it was not their purpose to ascribe scientific names or even common names. In his journal Clark describes the plant known now as *C. pulchella* in great detail with no attempt at giving it a name (Clark journal, May 29, 1806). However, the common name of *L. rediviva*, “bitter root”, may well have originated from Lewis’s remark that the root eaten by the Shoshone Indians “had a very bitter taste” (Lewis journal, August 22, 1805).

**Other species named after Lewis collection**

In his *Flora*, Pursh named other new species after Lewis, including *Linum lewisii* Pursh, prairie flax; *Mimulus lewisii* Pursh, purple monkey flower; *Philadelphus lewisii* Pursh, Lewis' mock orange. Click on these links to access the plants' pages in the “Lewis and Clark as Naturalists” website.

*Mimulus lewisii* in Pursh’s *Flora* - Detail
Photo Smithsonian Institution


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von Linne, Carl. 1753. Caroli Linnæi ... Species plantarum : exhibentes plantas rite cognitas, ad genera relatas, cum differentiis specificis, nominibus trivialibus, synonymis selectis, locis natalibus, secundum systemasexuæ digestas. Impensis Laurentii Salvii, Holmiæ. 2 volumes.


Note: Otherwise mentioned, the quotes from the journals are from Thwaites 1959.

Internet Resources

The rules of the formal naming of plants are now governed by the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature (ICBN). Recent editions of the ICBN are available on line.

For a detailed biography of Carl Carl von Linné, see “Carl Linnaeus Botanical History” on the Swedish Museum of Natural History’s website: http://www2.nrm.se/fbo/hist/linnaeus/linnaeus.html.en

The text of the University of Nebraska edition of the Lewis and Clark journals edited by Gary Moulton (2002), in a set of 13 volumes, is available at “The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition Online Edition” - http://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/

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