

Balloon Flower

Botanical Name: *Platycodon*

Family: *Campanulaceae*

The balloon flower's botanical name comes from the Greek *platys* (broad) and *kodon* (bell). This perennial is prized for its hardy blue flowers. Perhaps its durability comes from its heritage in China and the terrible problems for those botanical explorers who wanted to bring it to Europe and later America. Two of the earlier explorers are a German professor, Johann Georg Gmelin and Charles Maries who collected for the English firm of Veitch.



The Chinese platycodon was first described by Gmelin. In the court of Catherine the Great, he was sent to explore Siberia and “bring his scientific and botanical discoveries back to St. Petersburg.” Travel in Siberia was extremely slow and so difficult that the expedition took ten years to complete. In the winter, he told of his cabin windows having three inches of ice covering them, and so travel in the winter was all but impossible. In the summer the mosquitoes were so bad that Gmelin had to wear two pair of gloves to be able to record his botanical findings. In Yakutsk, where he was almost captured by the Tartars, his cabin burned to the ground and he lost everything collected and written to that date.

The Japanese balloon flower, *Platycodon grandiflorus* var. *mariesii* was discovered and named for our second collector of platycodons, Charles Maries. This brave botanist who was exploring in the late 1800's introduced many new plants from many areas in the world. It is said that he survived earthquakes, fire and shipwrecks; however, many of his specimens were not so lucky. He replaced one box of seeds when the boat they were on capsized and sank. In China, he was robbed of his collection and it was destroyed. After so many trials, he was sent in 1882 by Joseph Hooker to superintend the gardens of an Indian maharaja. He remained there, safely, until his death.

The balloon flower also can be found in pink and white. As we consider the extremely difficult times of two of the men who brought them west, it is almost a shame to put any but the prized blue into our gardens.

100 Flowers and How They got Their Names

by Diana Wells