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Meet the trees of Namibia ... Acacia? Senegalia? Vachellia? Why the name change?

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“THEY” call them Vachellia and Senegalia, we call these trees Acacia. Why is that so?

According to several authors in the internet the acacias until now included the Australian wattles and the thorn trees of the Serengeti or Namibia — both highly recognisable and iconic groups of plants.

Research has shown that the genus Acacia should be split into several genera, and a difficult decision was required as to whether the name Acacia should be used either for a very large group of species found mainly in Australia or for a smaller group found mainly in Africa and Central and South America.

Under the internationally accepted rules governing the naming of plants, the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature, the name would normally have remained with the African-American group, as this includes the species *Acacia nilotica*, which is the type species – that is the African species after which the genus was originally named about 200 years ago.

However, a special provision of the code allows for the name of the type species of a genus to be changed in cases like this, where strict application of the rules would require a large number of species to be renamed, and would cause confusion or significant difficulties for taxonomists or the wider community.

Two Australian botanists seeking to make an Australian acacia the type species filed an application under this provision in 2003. After due consideration, the relevant botanical committees decided in their favour.

The International Botanical Congress at Vienna in 2005 ratified this decision by a very narrow margin.

However, the proposal was and still is highly controversial. Acacia is an important genus in both Africa and Australia: in Africa it includes iconic and characteristic savannah species such as many flat-topped thorn trees – the silhouette of an acacia against a glowing sunset spells “Africa”.

But in Australia acacia is the dominant genus over much of the continent and includes the Australian floral emblem (the Golden Wattle *Acacia pycnantha*).

To the layperson it seems completely absurd that the name Acacia – Greek for 'a thorny plant' – should now be reserved for all those Australian plants that have no thorns. Nevertheless, some of these are of great economical importance as timber trees. Also changing the names of close on 1000 Australian species as opposed to about 200 Afro-American acacias would cause great inconvenience and expense.

The Australian acacias would have to be reclassified as *Racosperma*, which in Latin is neuter in gender and the species names, now conforming to the female gender of Acacia, would also have to be changed accordingly.

To increase the inconvenience for us, the African acacias have now been reclassified as two different genera: *Vachellia* for those with straight thorns and *Senegalia* for those with hooked thorns.

The website <http://www.sana.co.za/pdf/Acacia-Species-Name-Change.pdf> lists the new botanical names for our Acacias.

So in scientific literature the ubiquitous blackthorn or 'swarthaak' will now often be called *Senegalia mellifera* subsp. *detinens* and the camel-thorn *Vachellia erioloba*. Yet in everyday usage the name *Acacia* is bound to remain for all our trees with paired thorns, feathery leaves and distinctive pods.

Senegalia at least refers to the African country Senegal but I could find no explanation for the name *Vachellia*.

