# nature biotechnology

## What's in a name?

*To the editor:*

In your editorial, "Nomenclature on the fly" (14:1055, September 1996), you commented on the "fertile imagination" of *Drosophila* geneticists in the naming of genes and noted that, in many cases, the names of *Drosophila* genes give no indication whatsoever of their function. All true. There are many reasons for this, not the least being the the pure fun of thinking up a snappy and memorable name. More seriously, however, many *Drosophila* genes are discovered and studied well before there is any indication of the molecular nature of their product. Such was the case, of course, for the example you cite—hedgehog—discovered and named in 1980.

The *Drosophila* database—FlyBase—has published guidelines for the naming of *Drosophila* genes, available to all from our server (http://flybase.bio.indiana.edu:82/).

To say that the phenotypic, traditional names "certainly do not suit the rigors of a systematized (computerized) genetics" is wholly to miss the point. Links should be made, not to gene names (or symbols)—which may change—but to identifier numbers free of semantic content. There are many ways within the context of a well-organized database to represent the function or structure of a gene product without these data being reflected in a gene's name or symbol. We would agree that these mechanisms are far from perfect. For structural information, FlyBase uses gene identifier numbers to link to the Prosite database. It is trivial, therefore, to retrieve from FlyBase all genes now known to encode a protein with a particular Prosite motif or pattern. For gene function there is, as yet, no comparable resource. There are, however, moves afoot to systematize the representation of "gene function" information in genetic/genomic databases. Within six months or so we plan to offer users of FlyBase the opportunity to query the database for all genes whose products are involved in a particular function or process. We hope that other databases will do likewise and that, together, these databases will use a common structure and vocabulary. We can have the best of both worlds, a robust, computable system for keeping track of genetic and molecular data, and memorable, charming names that help humans remember biologically relevant facts.

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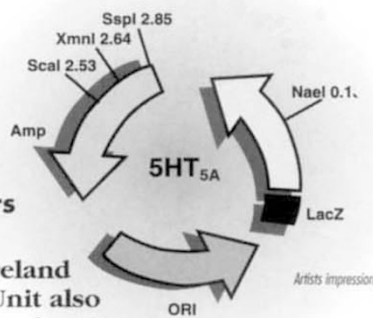*Cambridge, MA 02138*
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## Erratum

A research article in the May 1996 issue of *Nature Biotechnology* (14:624) entitled "Establishment of an *Agrobacterium*-mediated transformation system for grape (*Vitis vinifera* L.): The role of antioxidants during grape *Agrobacterium* interactions" refers to the grape plants used in the testing as *Vitis vinifera* cv. Superior Seedless. The internationally recognized varietal name for the grape plants that were tested is Sugraone. This grape variety is a proprietary variety of Sun World Internzational, Inc. (Sun World). The Sugraone variety is patented by Sun World in half a dozen countries, including Israel, where the testing reported in the article was conducted. Superior Seedless is a trademark owned by Sun World and used by Sun World and its licensees to identify its Superior Seedless brand of the Sugraone grape variety.