



**Fig. 2.1.** Explanation of sample oak species account in *Species Plantarum* (Linnaeus 1753).

Note that the genus name for the oaks (i.e., *Quercus*) was the same at the time of Linnaeus as it is now. When Linnaeus wrote his species accounts, he followed a repetitive format. Once understood, even without knowing all the Latin terms, the format is relatively easily navigated.

Linnaeus numbered each species under a genus separately. Thus in the excerpt shown here, we are seeing the first species in his treatment of oaks.

Following the species number, one will always find the name of the genus in all caps (in this case, QUERCUS; see **a**). The specific epithet (which is the second part of the scientific binomial) was always written in the margins (see **b**). This was the hallmark of Linnaeus' work and one of the reasons his work was chosen as the starting point of plant nomenclature: Unlike those before him, who either inconsistently provided epithets or only provided descriptive names (see **c**), Linnaeus consistently provided an epithet in the margins (**b**), in addition to the descriptive names popular during his time (see **c**). Thus, today, we would recognize the species treated here as *Quercus phellos* (genus = *Quercus*; specific epithet = *phellos*). Sometimes the specific epithet is referred to as the *species* name, but this is not technically correct. The correct *species* name is the genus and specific epithet combined (i.e., *Quercus phellos*).

Descriptive names (**c**) are just short phrases of distinguishing characters. These types of names worked just fine when few species were known, but as more and more species were discovered to western science (particularly with on-going explorations of the New World and Asia), it quickly became intractable to continue updating these names to reflect increased knowledge. The descriptive name for *Quercus phellos*, as shown above, is *Quercus foliis lanceolatis integerrimis glabris* (**c**), which means Oak with leaves (*foliis*) lanceolate (*lanceolatis*) entire (*integerrimis*) and without hairs (*glabris*). The abbreviated text following the descriptive name (i.e., *Gron. virg. 117*; **d**) is a bibliographic citation to another work where this name has appeared.

Synonyms, like **e** for example, are always listed immediately below the descriptive name and before the habitat (**h**). In our example, there are three synonyms, each with their own bibliographic citations (e.g., **f**).

Linnaeus frequently used symbols as shorthand to denote varieties or subspecies (**g**).

Habitat and/or distribution (**h**) was provided for all species and is often a useful clue when trying to determine for instance how many species were known from a particular continent at the time of his writing. In our case, *Quercus phellos*, is shown as being known from *America septentrionali* or northern America.