

from [www.space.com](http://www.space.com)

PASADENA, Calif. - Since the days of the ancient Egyptians, the planet Mars has been associated with one color and one color only in the popular imagination: Red.

They called it "Her Desher," or the "Red One." Both the Greeks and the Romans named it for their gods of war, Ares and Mars, respectively, because of its blood-red tint in the dark night sky. And we, of course, simply call it the "Red Planet."

But myriad new observations show that, up close, the Red Planet is really more -- butterscotch?

"It actually shows up as butterscotch or butternut," said Matthew Golombek, the project scientist on the Mars Pathfinder mission. "In every case where there was careful work done, from Viking to Global Surveyor to Pathfinder to the Hubble Space Telescope, its actually brownish yellow."

Of course, Mars - like our own "Blue Marble" and its infinite variations - isnt really monochromatic at all, which can lead to some linguistic contortions when it comes to summing up what is actually a pastel palette.

"Its a greenish, yellowish, tanish, with a tinge of pink," said Michael Malin of Malin Space Science Systems. The San Diego company has built cameras on a variety of Martian missions, including the Global Surveyor and Polar Lander.

"I dont think I would want to call it red."

Earlier this year, a group of NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory scientists tried to set the record straight with a paper published in the Journal of Geophysical Research.

In it, the group pegged the color of Mars as "light to moderate yellowish brown," according to naming conventions established by the Inter-Society Color Council-National Bureau of Standards.

That color generally gets shortened to "butterscotch."

"I was very disappointed, because butterscotch sounds silly," said Donna Shirley, former manager of the Mars Exploration Program at JPL. "But red isnt really the color."

However one describes the surface of Mars, it is the color it is thanks to the copious amounts of dust that cover it. The hematic dust, an iron-rich material that forms as a product of weathering, coats the planet like a mantle of rust.

"Mars is a rust pit when you get down to it," Golombek said. "That dominates the color palette."

But when it comes to images, like the torrent scientists are expecting from the Polar Lander, they can be easily enough manipulated to reflect just about any color one might want.

"I tend to just go for what looks appealing," Malin said.

But will "Butterscotch Planet" - much less "Light to Moderate Yellowish Brown Planet" - catch on any time soon?

Golombek said not likely.

"Its still the Red Planet because its substantially redder than any other place," Golombek said.