

# The Sterling Morton Library

## Collection of Herbals

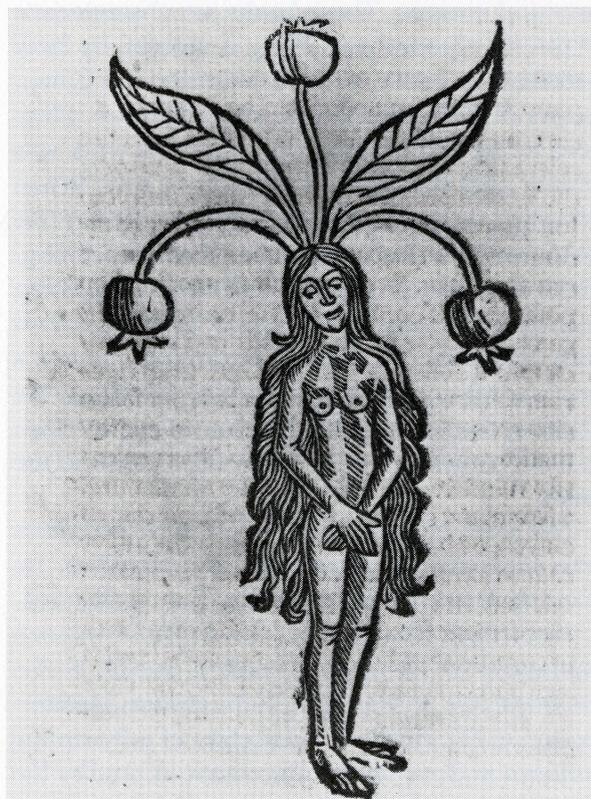
By Ian MacPhail

One of the major categories in the rare book collection at The Morton Arboretum is the collection of herbals. Herbals are of interest to a wide variety of scholars, to artists, to students of printing, to historians of medicine, to classicists, and, not least of course, to botanists. Since an interest in plants as a source of medicine was the foundation of botany, it is appropriate that such a collection should be represented in the Sterling Morton Library.

The herbal period in Europe lasted from about the first century AD well into the seventeenth century and even beyond, when the mineral or chemical sources of medicine began to replace plant sources. The word "herbal" itself was not used in English before 1516 and it was used then to mean either a collection of dried plants (what we should call a "herbarium" today), or a book on medicinal plants. The Latin word "herbarium" originally meant a herb-garden and only later came to mean a book in which herbs were depicted and then, by extension, one in which actual plant specimens were preserved. The French equivalent is *herbier*. The idea that the plant in the herbal should be not merely described but also illustrated is one that goes back to the beginning of the classical period.

Whatever the language, Latin, English, or French, the word "herbal" derives in the end from the Latin word *herba*, and this means simply a plant. Why do we not use the word "herb" in the same broad meaning today as it was used in classical times? It was used so in English into the period of the King James version of the Bible—"the herbs of the field," for example. Today it has become

restricted in meaning to a plant that has culinary or medicinal uses. In early times, just as the earth was regarded as the center of the universe so man was regarded as the center of the natural world and everything in nature was considered as relating to man either for good or ill. Consequently *all* plants were believed to have culinary or medicinal

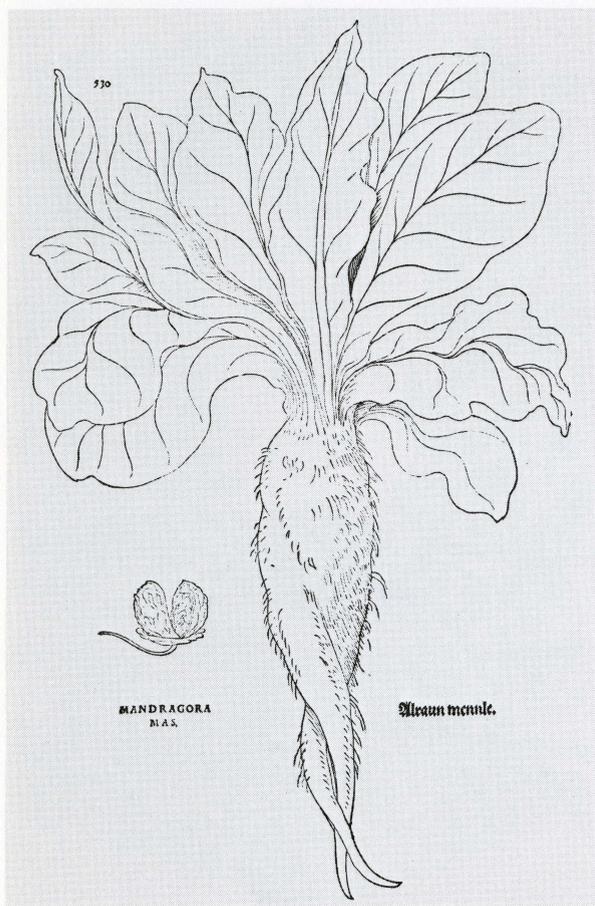


Mandragora, *mandrake*, Hortus sanitatis, Strasbourg 1497.



title are usually illustrated by rather crude and stylized woodcuts and the text is composed of citations from the old classical herbalists.

A new kind of herbal began to appear in the sixteenth century marked by elegant accurate drawings of plants made by skilled artists from live specimens and, later, by more original texts. These are represented in our collection by the herbals of Fuchs and Brunfels and Bock. The first two are known for the beauty of their illustrations, the last for the clarity and originality of its text. *Herbarum vivae icones*, (i.e. living images of



Mandragora, mandrake, Leonhard Fuchs: De historia stirpium, Basle, 1542.

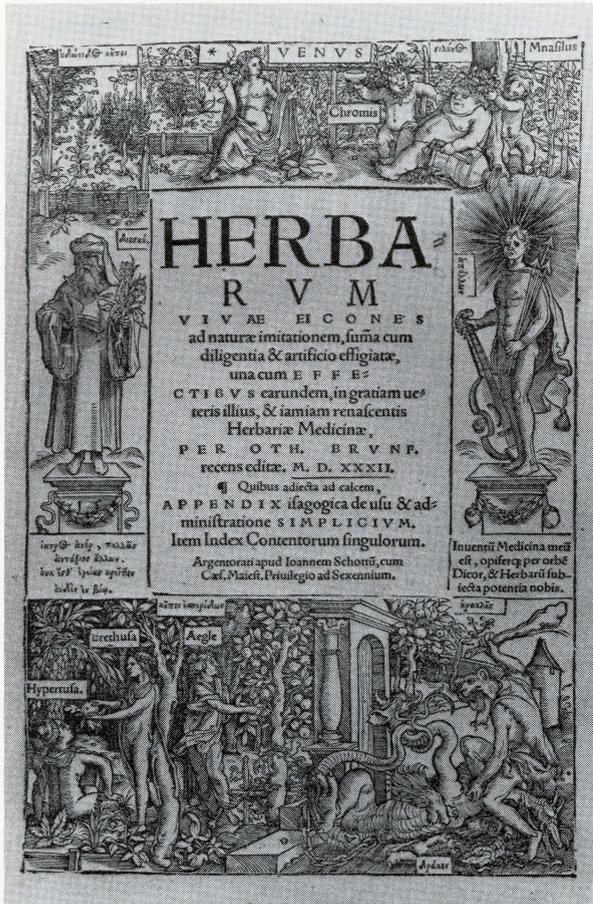
plants), Otho Brunfels' herbal, is certainly the most beautiful of all those in our library. It was published in 1532 at Strasbourg and the 238 woodcut illustrations are by Hans Weiditz, said to be a student of Albrecht Dürer. The Latin text is undistinguished but Brunfels was instrumental in persuading his friend, Hieronymus Bock, a country priest, to publish his vernacular herbal, *New Kreutterbuch*, in 1539, and Bock did in words only (his herbal was not illustrated) what Weiditz did with his sketching pencil, producing an accurate and detailed delineation of the plant under obser-



Helleborus niger, Christmas rose, Otho Brunfels: Herbarum vivae icones, Strasbourg 1532.

vation. It might almost be said that modern botany began with Weiditz's illustrations and Bock's words.

Andrea Mattioli, mentioned above, was the Italian counterpart of Brunfels and Bock. His major work was his long commentary on the text of Dioscorides, translated many times into other languages. Over forty editions are known. The earlier editions have rather small woodcuts of no great distinction, but after 1562 we find large woodcuts, the work of Georgio Liberale, some of which are very fine.



Title-page, Otho Brunfels: *Herbarum vivae icones*, Strasbourg 1532.

The best known and most loved of the English herbals is that of John Gerard, published in 1597 under the title, *Herball, or Generall Historie of plantes*. Gerard, trained as a barber-surgeon, took a great interest in plants and kept a famous garden in Holborn in London in which he grew many introductions from abroad, including the "potato of Virginia," as he called it. The frontispiece of his work is a portrait of Gerard holding a specimen of this plant. When the *Mayflower* colonists sailed for America they undoubtedly took a copy of Gerard's herbal with them.



Title-page, John Gerard: *The herball or general historie of plantes*, London 1597.

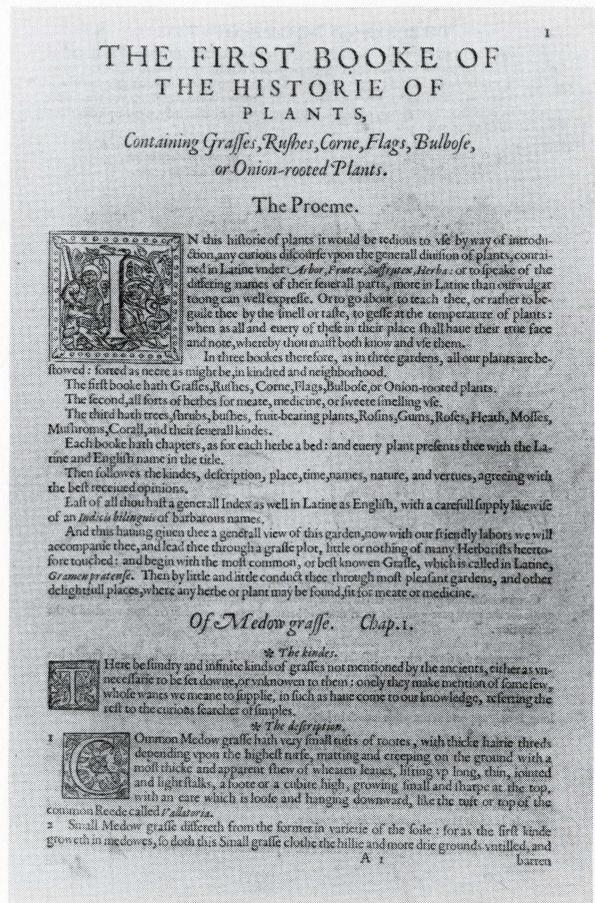
The first work that can be regarded as a herbal of the New World was Spanish. Its herbal content is quite small because it was intended as a general account of the Spanish island of Hispaniola, but twenty of the woodcuts in the first volume are of plants, including what is the first known illustration of the pineapple. The work is *Historia general de las Indias* (The general history of the Indies) and its author was Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdes, a friend of Columbus. It was published in two volumes at Seville, the first volume in 1535, the second not until 1557. Our copy bears the

florid signature of the author himself, presenting the book to a friend. Among the other American plants that he notices are the yam, named *Dioscorea* after Dioscorides, which has proved appropriately to be one of the richest sources of plant medicine, the melon, prickly pear, yucca, and corn.

The first work that can properly be called a herbal of the North American mainland was written by someone who never set foot there. It is *Canadensium plantarum aliarumque nondum editarum historia*, (History of Canadian plants and



Portrait of John Gerard, frontispiece, *Herball*, London 1597.

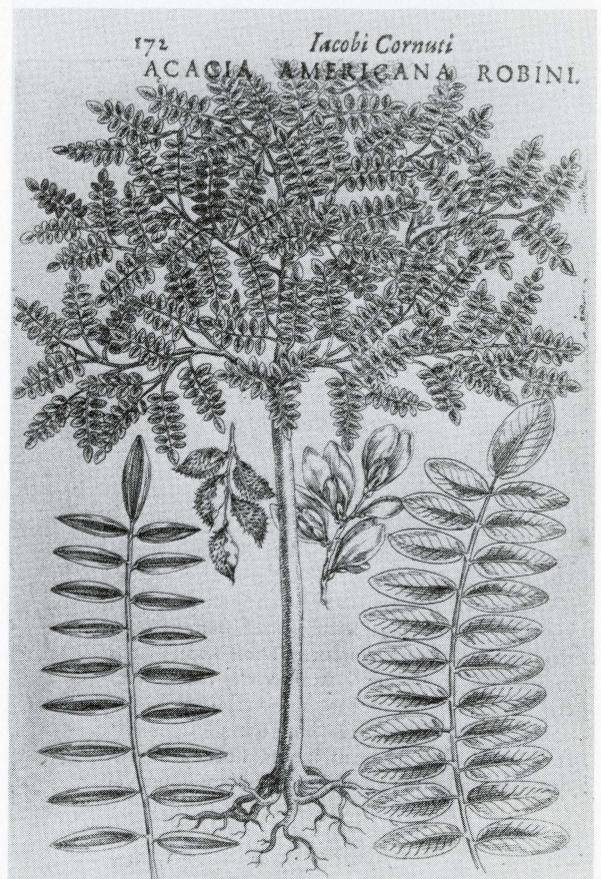
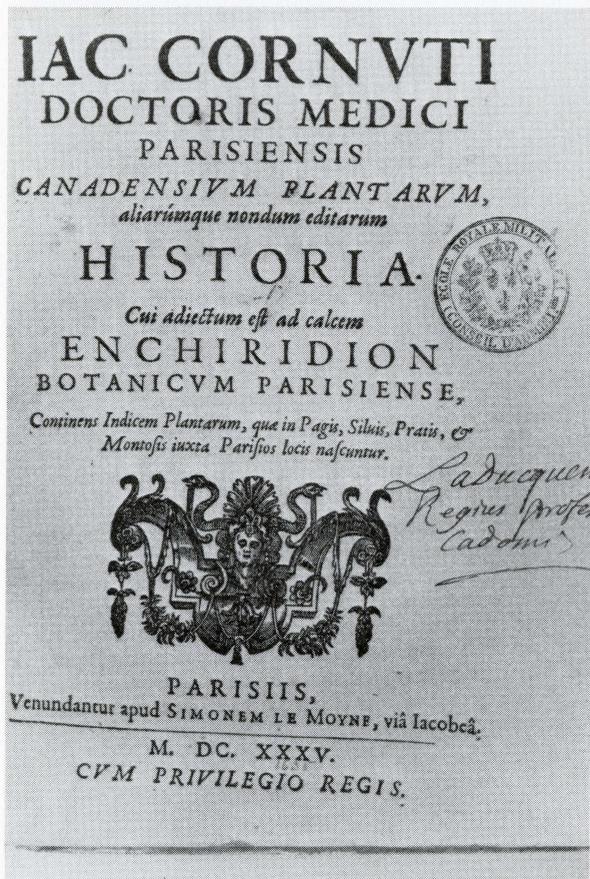


First page of text, *Gerard's Herbal*, London 1597.

others not yet published), Paris 1635. The author, Jacques Cornut, was a professor of medicine at the Sorbonne, and he saw the plants that he described in the Jardin du Roi, now the Jardin des Plantes. It was Samuel de Champlain who had sent them there from Quebec, and they were grown in the royal gardens by Jean Robin. One of the trees illustrated in the work was named *Acacia Robini* after the Superintendent of the garden. Today we know it as *Robinia pseudo-acacia*, the black locust, a very successful introduction to France. In fact the very tree that Robin planted and that Cornut saw

in the Jardin des Plantes is still to be found there today.

This is only a brief sampling of the riches of the Sterling Morton Library collection of herbals. There are about a hundred different works, including a few facsimiles. Together they encompass most of the great herbals of the western world, many of them in first or early editions. The collection is available for study during the normal library hours, but it is helpful to make an appointment.



Above: Title page, and Right: *Robinia pseudo-acacia*, black locust, Jacques Cornut: *Canadensium plantarum . . . historia*, Paris 1635.

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