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Medicinal use of herbs and vegetables in medieval gardens

Tacuinum Sanitatis,
Vienna fol. 25: Leek

Unknown master
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Cork City Library

24 August 2019

Beatrix Färber, School of History, UCC

Beginnings

Dioscorides (c. 40-90 CE) Materia Medica, c. 600.

A book of unparalleled historical importance for information about medicinal plants used by the Greeks, Romans, and other ancient cultures around the Mediterranean.



Asia Minor (with Cilicia and Tarsos) in the Greco-Roman period (332 BC-395 AD)

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Online in Spanish:

Dioscórides Interactivo: the Salamanca Dioscorides (De materia medica, Salamanca manuscript) Unversidad de Salamanca. Translated from Greek by Antonio López Eire and Francisco Cortés Gabaudan. With contributions by Bertha Gutiérrez Rodilla and Maria Concepción Vázquez de Benito. Editor and coordinador Alejandro Esteller.

Vienna Dioscorides
Blackberry plant

Codex medicus graecus 1,
Austrian National Library,
Vienna, fol 83 recto

Wikimedia Commons



Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE)
Naturalis Historia (Natural History)
37 books in ten volumes, an encyclopedia of the natural world


PLINII SECVNDI NOVOCOMENSIS ORATORIS PREFATIO INCIPIT IN LIBROS NATVRALIS HISTORIE AD TITVM VESPA SIANI FILIVM IMPERATOREM:

IBROS NATVRALIS HISTO RIE NOVITIVM CAMENIS QVIRI

Ms. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 82.4, fol. 3r
Public domain

Fathers of Medicine
From left, clockwise

Asclepios, Hippocrates, Avicenna, Rhazes, Aristoteles, Galen, Macer, Albertus Magnus, Dioscorides, Mesue, Serapion

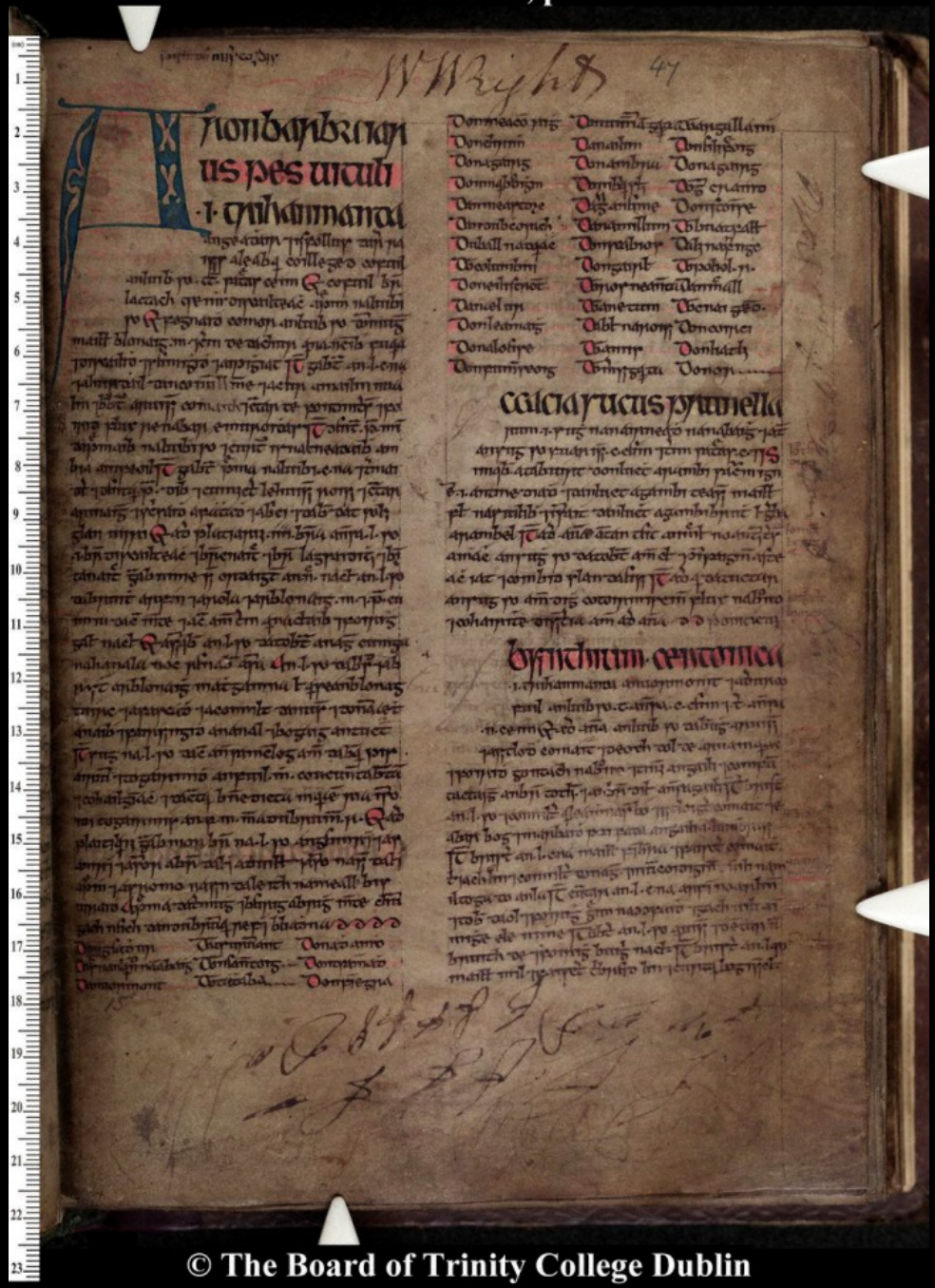
Giovanni Cademosto, c. 1495



Tadhg Ó Cuinn's Irish Materia Medica (1415)

Trinity College Library MS 1343

60 folios, 292 entries

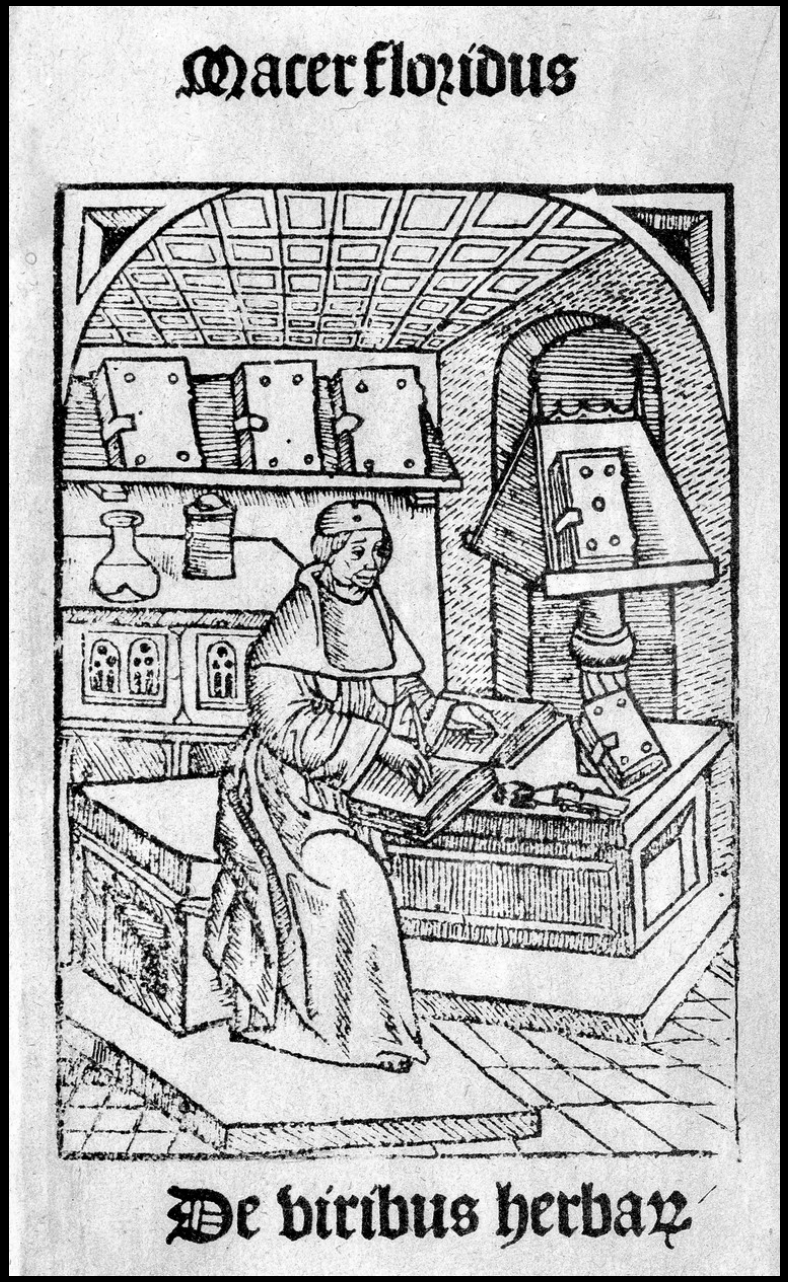


Digital Images at Irish Script on Screen
https://www.isos.dias.ie/english/index.html

Text edition prepared in XML/HTML at CELT
http://research.ucc.ie/celt/document/G600005

Macer Floridus
(=Odo Magdunenis)
De viribus herbarum,
16th century
Credit: Wellcome
Collection; CC BY

A herbal in hexameter
verse
Orig. 11th century



Isaac Judaeus; Omnia opera Ysaac in hoc volumine contenta: cum quibusdam alijs opusculis:

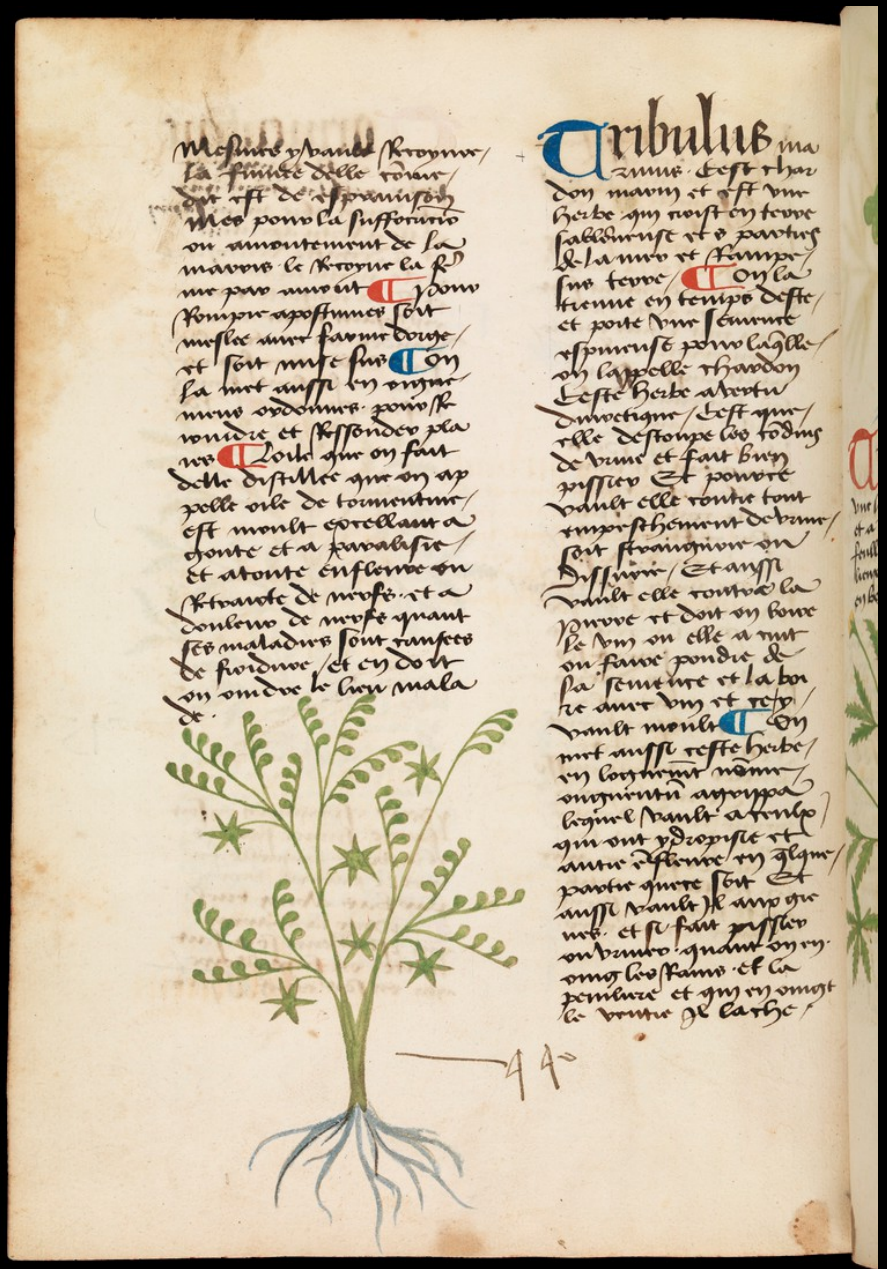
Credit: Wellcome Collection; CC BY

Orig. 10th century

Liber dietarum particularium: cum commentario [Petri Hispani]



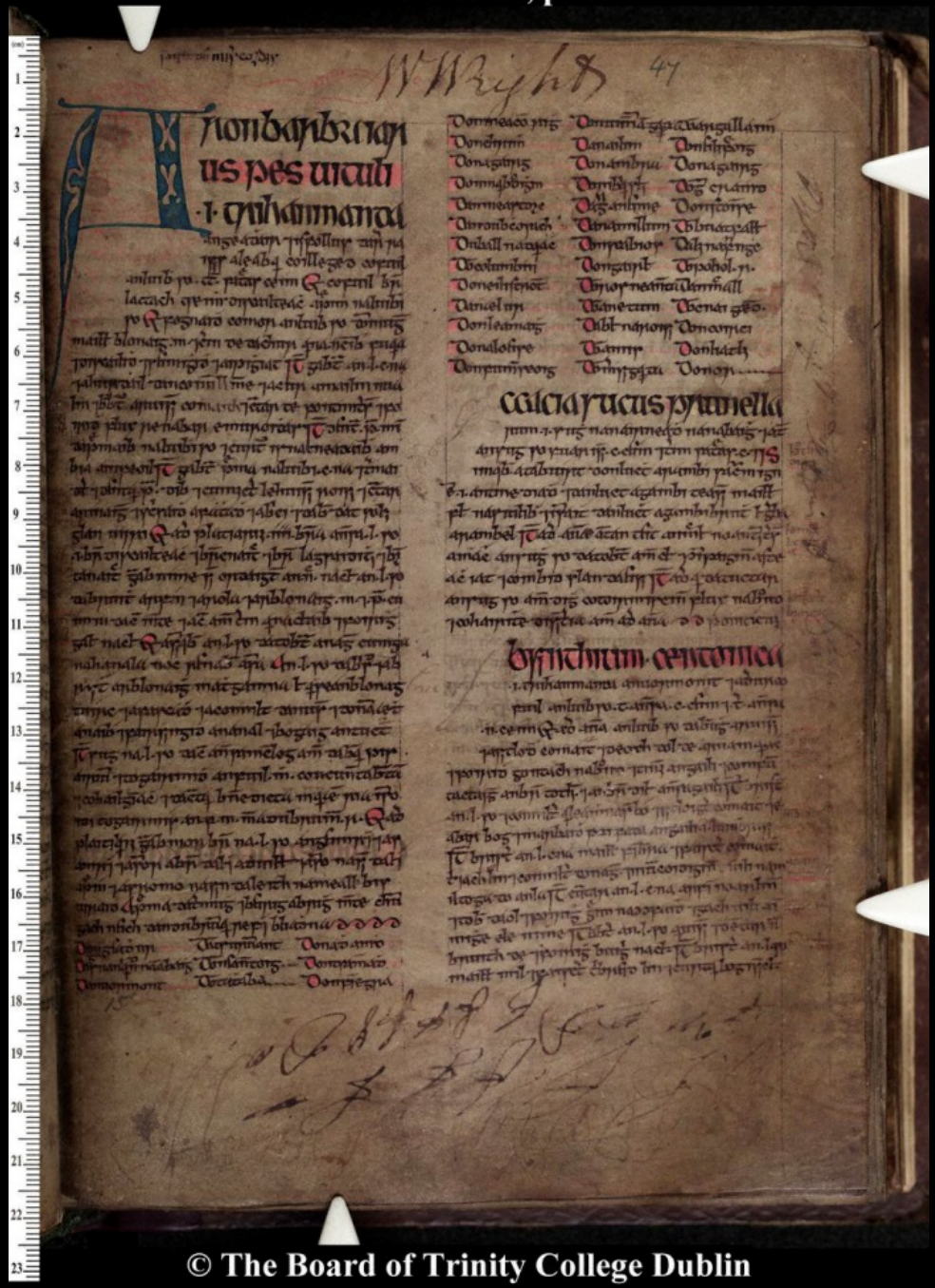
Johannes(?) Platearius,
Circa instans, seu de
medicamentis simplicibus
Credit: Wellcome Collection;
CC BY



Tadhg Ó Cuinn's Irish Materia Medica (1415)

Trinity College Library MS 1343

60 folios, 292 entries



1. Fennel
2. Sage
3. Lemon Balm
4. Parsley
5. Marigold
6. Plantain
7. Lettuce
8. Leek
9. Carrot

p 545f

Feniculus: i.e. fennel; hot in the second degree. If this herb be pounded and boiled in wine, it will help with every poison, and, likewise, it will help with disease of the kidneys. Against illness of the sight, put this herb in a drink, its tops, its seed, or its roots, and this medicine will be beneficial. (…) If the roots or seed of the same herb be boiled in wine or in ale, it will provoke menstruation and the urine, it will help with pain of the stomach, and it will stop vomiting. Item, against any swelling from coldness, caused by a fall or a blow, if a plaster of this herb with pig lard be put on it, it will cure it. If the seed of this herb be collected in the beginning of autumn, it will retain its efficacy for two years. If the roots of this herb be collected in the beginning of the spring, those roots will retain their efficacy for half a year. If the skin of the same roots be boiled in water and given to drink, it will open the oppilation of the liver and spleen. If the same water be given against pain of the stomach caused by windiness, it will give relief. (…). Item, if the juice of fennel be put in a bronze vessel for fifteen days, and put as an eye-wash on the eyes, it will dissolve the film or fog that is on the eyes.



p 627

Saluia: i.e. sage; hot and dry in third degree; its foliage is suitable for medical purposes; it is best when fresh; it retains its efficacy for a year (…). Sage has the comforting, corroding and dissolving virtues, and this herb greatly comforts the nerves (...) If sage be boiled in wine and given to people with paralysis or epilepsy, it will greatly comfort them. If the same herb be boiled in wine and a plaster of it be put on the part of the body which is shaking, it will help with it. If sage juice be put in a sauce or in other foods, and it be eaten by people with paralysis or epilepsy, it will greatly benefit them. (…). If the juice or powder of sage be put in sauces, it will increase the appetitive virtue. Item, take pellitory, sage, vinegar, and a little pepper, and eat them, and this will clean the stomach of the gross humours. If a fomentation be made of the foliage of sage, it will expel the aborted foetus. If this herb be put on the bite of a mad dog, it will help with it. If it be put on wounds, it will stop the bleeding. If this herb be boiled in wine, it will help with a chronic cough.

p 510

Citragha (i.e. Lemon balm): (…): hot and dry in the second degree; the efficacy of this herb is great when it is fresh and small when it is dried; it preserves its efficacy for a year; it has the consuming and dissolving virtues; it is good against oppilation of the liver and the spleen; if it be boiled in wine or ale and the smell of it put to the nose, it will comfort the brain. If the foliage of this herb be put in a little bag and boiled in wine, and placed on the top of the head, it will stop the movement of rheum and headache. A bath should be made of this herb from the navel down, to provoke menstruation; this herb has the power to work against every cold illness, and, in particular, against illness of the head.

p 601f

Petrosilium: i.e. parsley; hot and dry in the third degree; there are two sorts of it, the domestic sort and the wild sort; its seed and root serve best for medical purposes; its seed retains its efficacy for five years; it has the diuretic and comforting virtues; this herb is of benefit against windiness if eaten raw or cooked, it greatly comforts the stomach, and it gently relaxes the abdomen. If this herb be boiled with borage and mutton, it will serve powerfully against stranguria, dysuria and oppilation of the liver and spleen. (…)

p 621f.

Sol sequium, sponsa solis (...): i.e. marigold; it is cold and dry, but in what degree is not to be found in Platearius' book; it serves for medical purposes when it is fresh; it has the ability to nourish against every poison; poisonous animals do not live in a garden in which it is planted. If a plaster of this herb on its own be put on the bite of a mad dog, the poison does not develop again thereafter. If this herb be drunk in wine or ale, it will open the oppilation of the liver and spleen. If a plaster of this herb be put on warts, it will help with them. If the flower of this herb be drunk in water for nine days, it will help with jaundice.

p 488f.

Plantago maior: i.e. plantain; it is cold in the first degree and dry in the second degree; to clean and heal wounds, it is good to pound this herb and to put honey through it; if a pottage be made of this herb in a rich mutton soup or in milk, it will help with flux of the abdomen. Item, pound this herb and put it in milk, and it will help with the spitting of blood and with the coughing that comes from hotness. Item, if a plaster of this herb be put on a wound, it will stop its bleeding. If the same herb be pounded and put through the white of egg, it will help powerfully with a burn. If this herb be pounded and wool be dipped in it and it be put on the bite of a mad dog, it will help with it. (…) If the juice of the same herb be held in the mouth, it will help with disease of the mouth. (…) Item, to stop menstruation, dip some waxed wool in the juice of the herb, and put it in the vagina. (...) If this herb be pounded in water and given to the woman from whom the afterbirth has not been expelled, the expulsion will occur soon. Item, if the same herb be dipped in vinegar and rubbed on the feet after walking or labouring, it will cure them.

p 564f

Lactuca: i.e. lettuce; cold and wet in the second degree; if it be pounded and applied as a plaster to the parts of the body where there is an excess of heat, this will relieve it. If it be applied with white of egg as a plaster to the forehead, it will provoke sleep in the acute fevers, and its efficacy and operation is the same as those of portulaca. Platearius says that this herb is temperate, and that its seed is colder than the herb itself; this herb serves well as a food for fever patients, and its seed as a medicine; Platearius says, on the authority of all the experts, that this herb is the most temperate of all the herbs, because it produces good blood; it increases the mother's milk, and it the sperm; it is the right food for people with the choleric humour. It is appropriate, raw or cooked, for every hot complexion. If it be boiled in vinegar and sugar be put through it, it will open the oppilation of the liver and spleen. If the seed of this herb be pounded with white of egg through it, and it be applied as a plaster to the temples, it will provoke sleep. If this herb be rubbed on the nipples of the breasts, and so given in the mouth of the child, it will provoke sleep. Item, Macer says that if wax and this herb be taken with vinegar, it will comfort the stomach and relax the abdomen; but if it be taken regularly it will darken the vision. If it be boiled in water, and the water given to drink to fever patients, it will provoke sleep. (…) the reason why it is called *lactuca* is that *lac* is milk, and the herb has white milk in it, as we have said.

p 605-607

Porrum: i.e. leeks; hot and dry, its hotness in the third degree and its dryness in the second degree. The juice of the white lower part of the leek to be given, with the herb itself, to people who bleed from the mouth, and they will recover. If the tops of leeks be pounded and honey put through it, and this be put in foul wounds where there is much pus, it will help with them. The juice of this herb in warm tisane will stop coughing. If leeks be pounded and honey put through it and it be applied to the bite of a mad dog, it will help with it, and it helps with any poison. (...) If leeks be eaten at the beginning of a meal, this will prevent drunkenness. When taken at the beginning of a meal, it has the laxative virtue. If eaten by women at the beginning of meals, they will have many children. (...) If roots of leeks be boiled in wine and drunk, it will help with poison. If the bulb of the leek be boiled in the milk of almonds and eaten, it will induce sexual desire. There is a wild sort of the leek called chives, which is hot in the fourth degree and dry in the third degree, and it has the virtue of dissolving the cold humours, and it provokes the urine and menstruation when eaten raw. (...)

p 523f

Daucus asininus: . i. carrot; hot and dry in the third degree; its efficacy is great in its seed, its foliage, its root, and its flower; the reason why it is called by this name i.e. daucus asininus is that asininus is donkey, and it is the proper food of the donkey. There is another sort of this herb which is called daucus creticus and it is from the island called Crete that it is named, that is a Greek island, since it grows only in that island. This herb has the consuming, dissolving and attenuating virtues because of the fineness of its substance, and because of its equal qualities; this herb serves well when boiled with dry figs in wine against asthma and a cold wet cough; when there is trouble in the chest arising from cold matter, and without fever, this herb should be boiled in wine with liquorice and powder of cranesbill, and drunk early in the day and in the evening. Item, take two thirds of wine and one third of water, a handful of maidenhair spleenwort, a handful of mercury and of carrot, equal amounts of each herb, pound them, boil them in wine or water as we have said, strain them, and, when honey has been added, drink, and it will open oppilation of the liver and the spleen (...)

References to medieval and early modern herb gardens on the Continent

Charlemagne (c. 742/747–814): Capitulare de villis vel curtis imperii (c.795)

English translation: University of Leicester (https://www.le.ac.uk/hi/polyptyques/capitulare/trans.html)

Capitulare de Villis,
Ch. 70
Codex Guelf. 254
Helmstadensis, Herzog August
Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel,
Germany

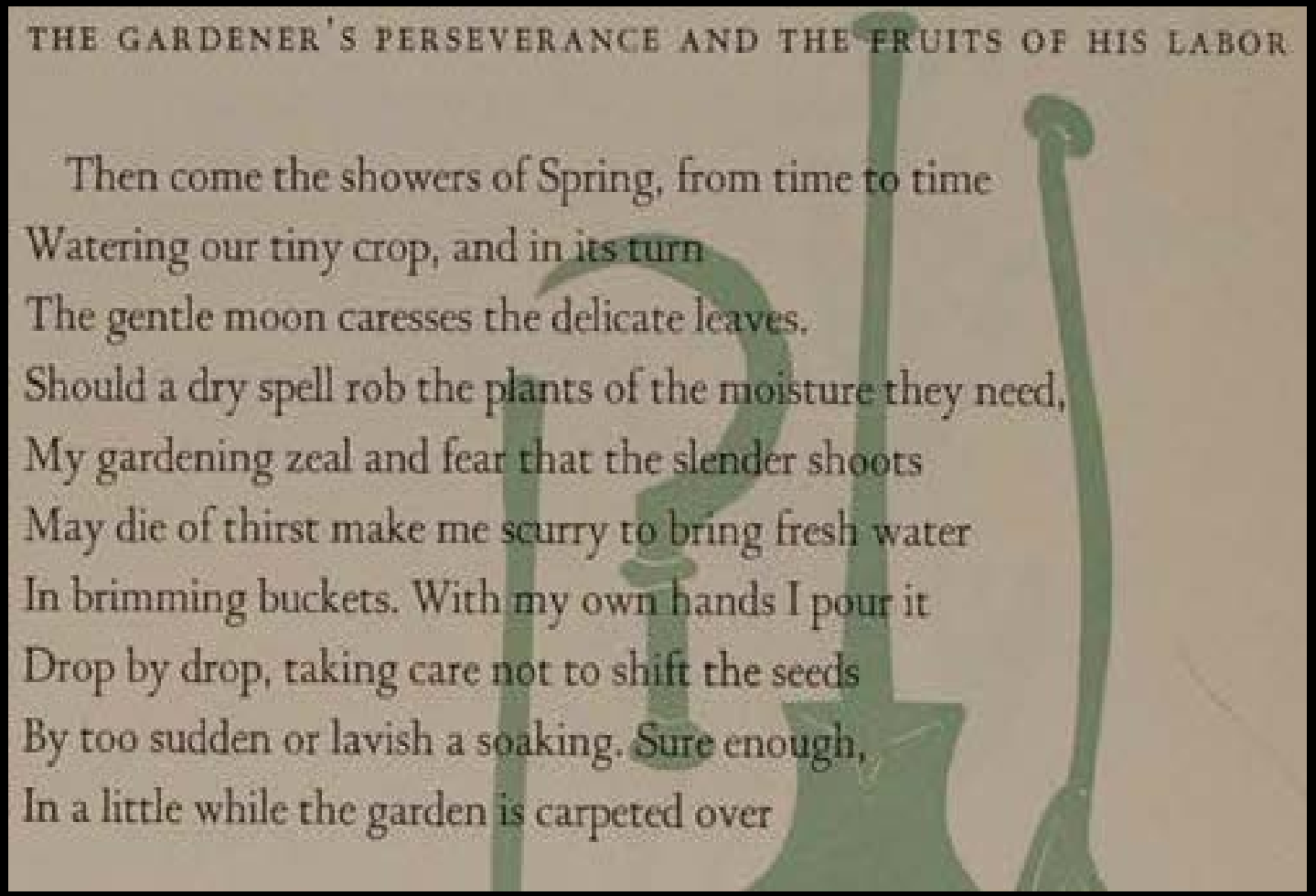
Wikimedia Commons



70. It is our wish that they shall have in their gardens all kinds of plants: lily, roses, fenugreek, costmary, sage, rue, southernwood, cucumbers, pumpkins, gourds, kidney-bean, cumin, rosemary, caraway, chick-pea, squill, gladiolus, tarragon, anise, colocynth, chicory, (…), lettuces, spider's foot, rocket salad, garden cress, burdock, penny-royal, hemlock, parsley, celery, lovage, juniper, dill, sweet fennel, endive, dittany, white mustard, summer savory, water mint, garden mint, wild mint, tansy, catnip, centaury, garden poppy, beets, hazelwort, marshmallows, mallows, carrots, parsnip, orach, spinach, kohlrabi, cabbages, onions, chives, leeks, radishes, shallots, cibols, garlic, madder, teazles, broad beans, peas, coriander, chervil, capers, clary. And the gardener shall have house-leeks growing on his house. As for trees, it is our wish that they shall have various kinds of apple, pear, plum, sorb, medlar, chestnut and peach; quince, hazel, almond, mulberry, laurel, pine, fig, nut and cherry trees of various kinds. The names of apples are: gozmaringa, geroldinga, crevedella, spirauca; there are sweet ones, bitter ones, those that keep well, those that are to be eaten straightaway, and early ones. Of pears they are to have three or four kinds, those that keep well, sweet ones, cooking pears and the late-ripening ones.

Medieval herb gardens on the continent were monastic herb gardens, such as the Benedictines' and after 1143 the Cistercians'. This enclosed space was called the 'hortus'.
The most famous mention is in the poem *Hortulus* (little garden) by abbot Walahfrid Strabo from Reichenau on Lake Constance.
(http://decodedpast.com/the-early-horticulture-of-benedictine-and-cistercian-monks/101)
Latin and German versions: http://turba-delirantium.skyrocket.de/bibliotheca/walahfried_strabo_hortulus_lat.htm
English version: *Hortulus*, Hunt Botanical Library, Pennsylvania 1966; translation in hexameters by Raef Payne

The author on his perseverance and the fruits of his labour:



THE GARDENER'S PERSEVERANCE AND THE FRUITS OF HIS LABOR

Then come the showers of Spring, from time to time
Watering our tiny crop, and in its turn
The gentle moon caresses the delicate leaves.
Should a dry spell rob the plants of the moisture they need,
My gardening zeal and fear that the slender shoots
May die of thirst make me scurry to bring fresh water
In brimming buckets. With my own hands I pour it
Drop by drop, taking care not to shift the seeds
By too sudden or lavish a soaking. Sure enough,
In a little while the garden is carpeted over

With tiny young shoots. True, that part there
Below the high roof is dry and rough from the lack
Of rain and the heaven's benison; true, this
Part here is always in shade, for the high wall's
Solid rampart forbids the sun to enter.
Yet of all that was lately entrusted to it, the garden
Has held nothing enclosed in its sluggish soil
Without hope of growth. What is more, those plants that were moved,
More dead than alive, to the newly dug furrows are now
Green again; our garden has brought them back
To life, making them good with abundant growth.
Now I must summon all my skill, all
My learning, all my eloquence, to muster
The names and virtues of this noble harvest,
That this my lowly subject may receive
The highest honor that my art can give.



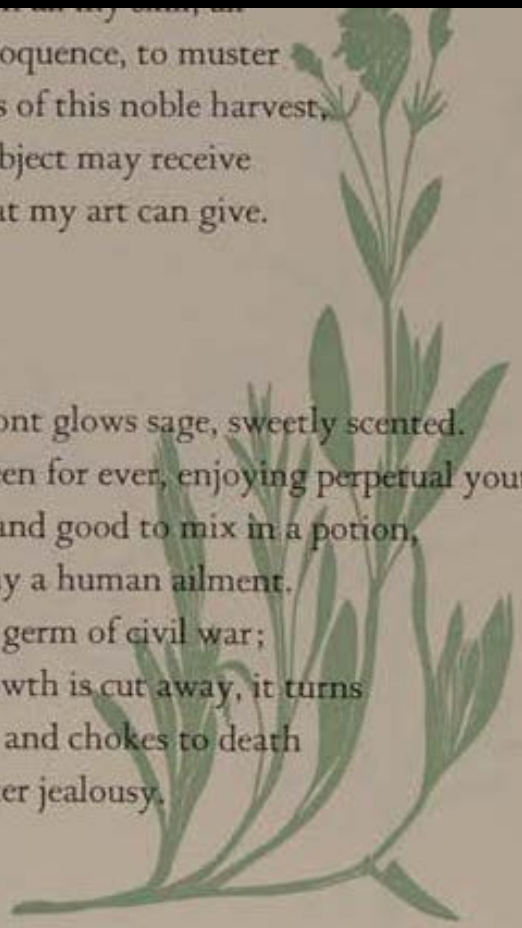
SALVIA , salvia officinalis

Lelifagus prima præfulget fronte locorum,
Dulcis odore, gravis virtute atque utilis haustu.
Pluribus hæc hominum morbis prodesse reperta
Perpetui viridi meruit gaudere iuventa.
Sed tolerat civile malum: nam sæa parentem
Progenies florum, fuerit ni dempta, peririt
et facit antiquos defunier invida ramos

My learning, all my eloquence, to muster
The names and virtues of this noble harvest,
That this my lowly subject may receive
The highest honor that my art can give.

Sage

There in the very front glows sage, sweetly scented.
It deserves to grow green for ever, enjoying perpetual youth;
For it is rich in virtue and good to mix in a potion,
Of proven use for many a human ailment.
But within itself is the germ of civil war;
For unless the new growth is cut away, it turns
Savagely on its parent and chokes to death
The older stems in bitter jealousy.



References to medieval and early modern herb gardens in Ireland/Scotland

1. Archaeological excavations near monasteries
2. Place-names containing Irish *luibhghort* 'herb garden' (< luibh 'herb' + gort 'enclosed or tilled field')
3. Anglo-Irish apothecaries' reaction to direct competition with native Gaelic doctors.
4. The Irish Annals (late and few references).

1. Research by Scottish Archaeologist Dr Brian Moffat
In Soutra Medieval Hospital, 17 miles south of Edinburgh, run by the Augustinians from the 12th century, shows how once patients were treated.

Moffat said many of the plants at the site have come from three continents with a number still growing there, including highly-toxic hemlock. It was earlier discovered at the site along with the seeds of opium poppies and black henbane. The trio offered a remarkable insight into surgical practices at the hospital. Moffat added: "There is only one recipe where these three toxic plants are mixed together. It is administered before amputating limbs."
(…) Evidence of stillborn babies and the drugs used to induce childbirth have also been found. The bitter vetch was used as an appetite suppressant in times of war and famine. Clove has been found, too. According to Moffat, "herbal medicine tended to be exotic and expensive. And of course, if you spoke Latin, you could speak to anyone in Europe to have your supplies imported. Some of the plants have come from the Alps and the Middle East."

2. E.g. the townland of Luffertaun (‘herb garden’), Co. Mayo, is first mentioned in the *Book of Lecan*, c.1410, 73b va, 49-50.
See https://www.logainm.ie/ga/35832)
John O'Donovan, *Genealogies, Tribes, and Customs of Hy-Fiachrach*, 153: “The (…) name of Lughortan is well known, being that of a townland in the parish of Ballintober, containing the ruins of a castle said to have been erected by the family of Burke. It is anglicised Luffertaun, which represents the local pronunciation correctly enough, though the same name is rendered Lorton, and even Lowerton and Lowertown (…) The true Irish spelling, however, is Lubhghortán, but the orthography was corrupted at an early period.” (…) Cormac’s Glossary has Lughbhortan as the form of Lubhghortan in his own time.

3. The relationship of doctors and apothecaries in the Pale from 1562 is shown by the complaint by the apothecary of Dublin, Thomas Smith, to the Lord Deputy Henry Sidney and to the Privy Council that he had been 'greatly hindered and in manner enforced to abandon his faculty, because his costly drugs and other apothecary wares had remained unsold, as a number of the people of Irish birth preferred to make use of the ministry of their own leeches or physicians.'
(Henry F. Berry, 'The Ancient Corporation of Barber-Surgeons, or Gild of St. Mary Magdalene, Dublin', *JRSAI*, 5th Ser, 33: 3 [5th Ser vol 13] (Sep 30 1903) 217–238: 226.)

Corpus of Electronic Texts, University College Cork

Old website: https://celt.ucc.ie/index.html

NEW website:

https://www.ucc.ie/en/research-sites/celt/