

*De Historia Stirpium* by Leonhart Fuchs  
Basel: In officina Isingriniana, 1542.  
Gift of the Friends of the Library, 1963

This book is part of a long tradition of herbals, or books that describe plants and their medicinal uses. Before the sixteenth century, most herbals were based on a well-known first-century work by Dioscurides, a Greek physician and author of the first known book on medicinal plants. Works by Galen, a Roman physician of the second century A.D., were also an important source of medical knowledge. Although the medieval herbals derived from these books probably contained useful information about plants, the information and illustrations they contained were based on tradition, not on scientific observation.

Leonhart Fuchs, the author of this herbal, was interested in illustrating plants as they looked in nature instead of following ancient tradition. He hired several artists to help him with this undertaking. Albrecht Meyer was responsible for drawing the plants from life, Heinrich Füllmaurer transferred them onto woodblocks, and Veit Rudolf Speckle, “by far the best engraver in Strasbourg,” carved the woodblocks used for printing. The beautiful, densely illustrated book that resulted from their efforts contains some of the finest pictures of plants made from life in the sixteenth century, some hand-colored under Fuchs’ supervision for the greatest accuracy.

However, Fuchs was not interested in merely producing an attractive book; *De Historia Stirpium* was meant to be used. Fuchs was a prominent physician and university professor in Germany, and this work was intended as a reference book for his fellow doctors and medical students. Fuchs wrote descriptions of each plant’s medicinal properties and uses, drawing on Galen and Dioscurides but also on his own observations. Although there are errors throughout, this book represents one of the first attempts to construct a modern medical reference text. Surviving copies of Fuchs’ herbal often contain pressed plant samples and notes in the margins that point to extensive use, and the copy belonging to Special Collections is no exception. In this way, the book also gives modern scholars insight into how early physicians studied and administered herbal medicines.

This book is also important for its value as a scientific document. It is the first description and illustration of over 100 species of plants, including New World plants such as pumpkins, squash, chili peppers, and corn. It is thought that many of these plants were drawn from specimens Fuchs acquired and grew in his own garden.

*De Historia Stirpium* is one of the most valuable books in Special Collections, but it is also one of the most usable as a scholarly resource. With so many different types of information in one book, the University is fortunate to have such a treasure.