herbs

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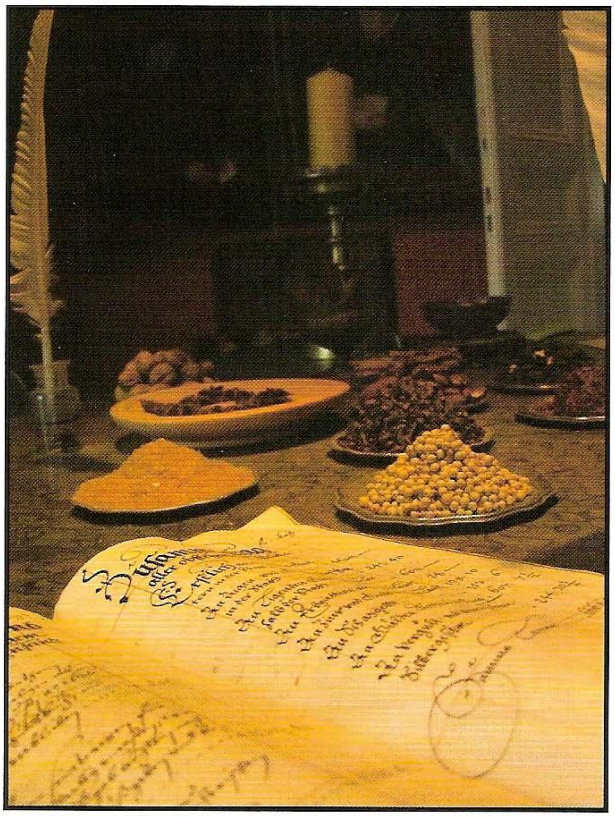
Spice sacks and the city

Gareth Evans finds traces of herbal history and imagery at every turn on a visit to Nuremberg.



"I say it not unreasonably; the area around Nuremberg deserves to be called one of Germany's paradises."

Johann Heinrich van Falckenstein 1733.

The spice trade evokes for most of us the image of global ocean routes that, once discovered, brought previously unthought-of cargoes of immensely valuable spices such as pepper, ginger, cinnamon and cloves from the Far East, especially China and India. It is this trade that helped make European ports such as Amsterdam and London great cities. But for the centuries before the sea trade was established the long land routes known collectively as the Silk Roads gradually brought their consignments of spices across central Asia to the eastern Mediterranean where the trading continued as they were shipped into Europe.

Nuremberg's celebrated wealth was won not with the aid of a harbour or even a helpful navigable river. Instead it created for itself 'rivers of trade', the most important of which from Genoa in Italy, was a leading entry point for Silk Road cargoes. In a vivid image it is said that once founded the city of Nuremberg grew as vigorously as "a weed by the wayside".

Golden Age of Trade

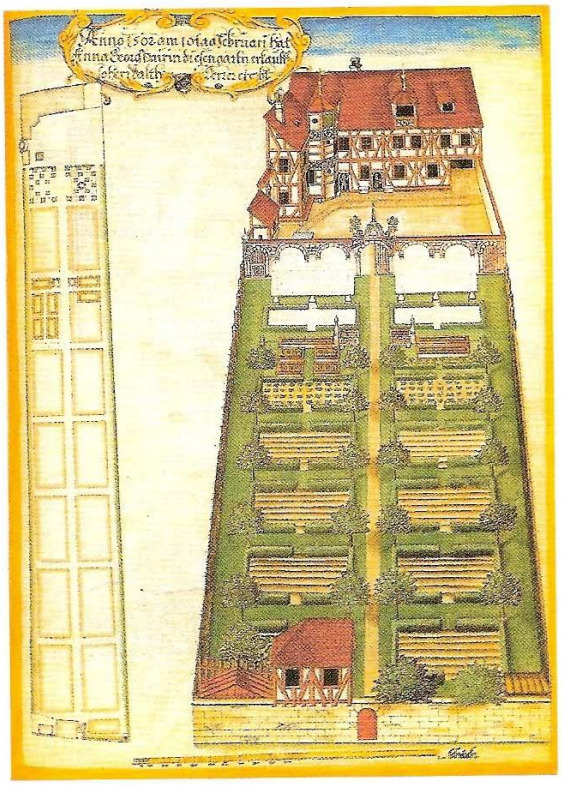
There are many legacies of this golden age of trade, not least is the very good gingerbread, Lebkuchen, available at the time of the Christmas market. In the one remaining merchant's house of the period, the Renaissance Tucherschloss, there is an aromatic display of the family's much-travelled bounty. The combination of the trade routes and the wealth of the substantial merchants, or 'pepper sacks' as they were known, brought into the middle of Europe exotic plants from the Mediterranean and beyond.

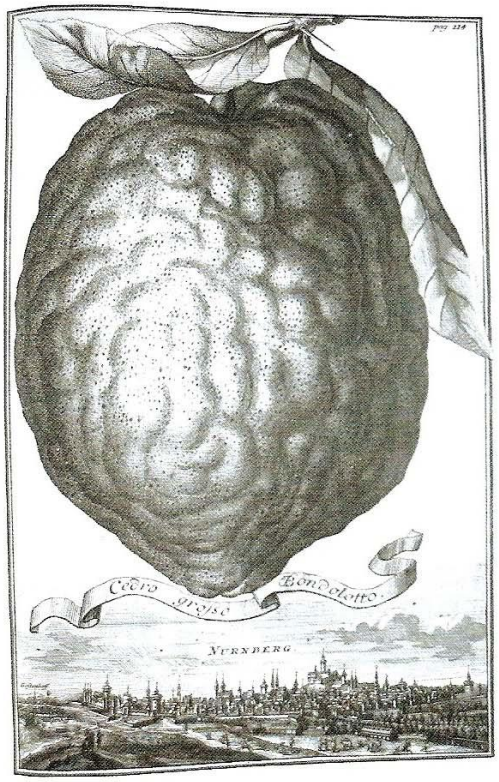
The city's so-called 'Hesperides gardens' were developed outside the city walls by families vying with each other for the status they gave. In a successful 1708 publication (Christoph Volckamer's *Nürnbergische Hesperides*) the local estates are depicted together with a specimen of citrus fruit grown in each; an early precursor of the garden and lifestyle magazines of our own times. Hovering menacingly over the landscape these fruits were prized for their monstrosity (lumpy skin, division into fingers etc). As a contemporary in another part of Europe commented: "We prize conformity in people as beauty, but deformity in our hothouse fruits".

Artists and scholars

Just over a century before, in perhaps a simpler age, the great Nuremberg-born artist Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) returned to his birthplace after his juvenile travels to set up home and grow a garden. His plant drawings, especially his unassuming work, *Great Piece of Turf*, shows that although he was courted by emperors he still studied the least of things. In Dürer's time Nuremberg was a city of gardens with almost 300 substantial plots (in total over 10,000 square metres in size). Dürer drew the road leaving the city where the trees push their heads over the gardens' high walls, each with their double-height summer houses that were to protect the palm trees as well as the lemons and limes. In this now built-over area one of these gardens can still be visited, but it is laid out in a later, more formal parterre-style. There you can sit and sample excellent waffles before paying your respects to Dürer's grave in the nearby flower-filled burial ground.

Once settled here the resident artists, craftsmen and scholars of this city seemed to be reluctant to leave. Surrounded by deep woods and fertile fields it was, as now, an attractive city and the historic market garden district Knobslauchsland (garlic country) remains within an arrow's shot of the mighty





Opposite page: Nuremberg at the end of the Silk Road. A display of spices traded by the Tucher family (Tucherschloss Museum). Above Left : An early fifteenth-century Nuremberg garden. Above right: A giant deformed citrus fruit menaces the eighteenth-century city from above, from Volckamer's *Nürnbergische Hesperides* (1708-1714).

castle. The fine churches, mansions, public buildings and artworks can still be seen today in the skilfully restored old town. What these professions also valued was the relative freedom of thought and action the city held for them.

An interesting example of this was the publishing of the *Pharmacopoeia* of 1552. When a learned physician passed through the city and showed to the Nuremberg authorities his compilation of the best recipes gathered in his travels, the city fathers published them in what is widely accepted as Europe's first authorised pharmacopoeia. Such a list of approved medicinal preparations was a way to raise the standard of public health. Incidentally, this was a mere thousand years after the first public pharmacopoeia was authorised at the other extremity of the Silk Road in China.

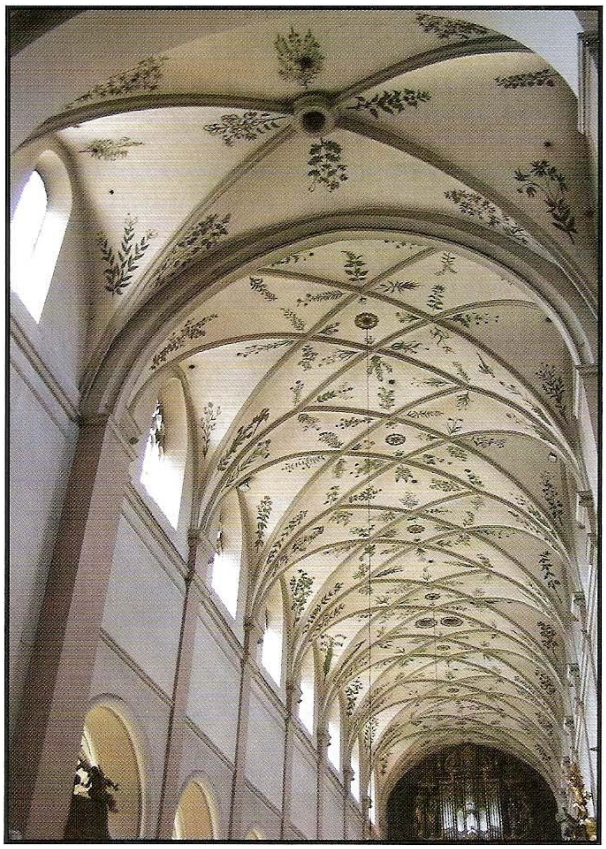
City garden

One of the most remarkable city gardens of the sixteenth-century was created by physician Joachim Camerarius the Younger (1534-1598). Like Dürer before him, he travelled extensively when young to acquire some professional standing, only to return to his home city to make a garden. Unlike Dürer however he is not widely known to us today despite his important influence on subsequent people and ideas. Camerarius' city garden was well stocked with a wide range of medicinal plants acquired with the assistance of the city merchants and his contacts around Europe. His *Hortus medicus* was published 36 years after the ground-breaking Nuremberg *Pharmacopoeia* and with plain but attractive woodcuts no doubt containing some portraits of the herbs from his garden.

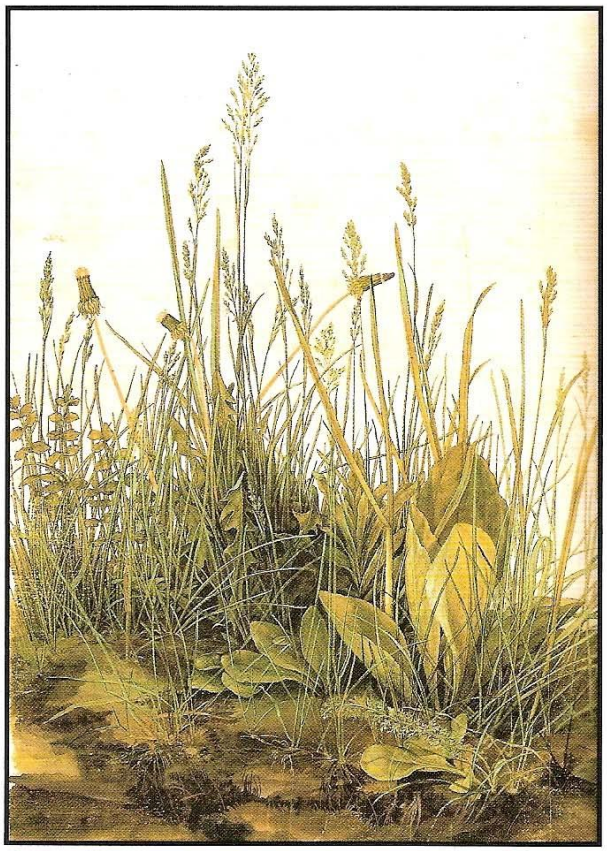
Camerarius was later to help in the early stages of one of the most famous of all gardens, Eichstätt, not far from Nuremberg, supplying it with specimens from his own garden. The Eichstätt Garden was immortalised on paper in the much-reproduced florilegium, *Hortus Eystettensis* (1613). Like the garden whose flowers it records, this publication borrows heavily from the content of Camerarius' modest *Hortus medicus.* It is thought that many of the illustrations in the Nuremberg-produced *Hortus Eystettensis* were based on plants from the convenient city gardens, including Camerarius', rather than the distant garden of the prince bishop.

Heaven's Garden

To see an equally impressive but more accessible representation of contemporary herbal culture I followed the river system downstream to the town of Bamberg - an historic gem that lies comfortably on seven gentle hills. Atop one of the hillis is the imposing church of the former abbey of St Michael's (Michaelskirche),



Above: The Himmelsgarten at St. Michael's, Bamberg



Above: Dürer's watercolour known as the *Great Piece of Turf* 1503.

which has good views of the historic city and the wide countryside around.

At the time of the richly-planted Eichstätt and Nuremberg gardens, this fine church suffered a devastating fire that led to extensive rebuilding. It was decided to adorn the ceiling of the new nave with illustrations of medicinal plants. The paintings were finished in 1617 and, in the manner of herbals of the era, they are not crowded together but presented as botanically-accurate single portraits. In addition to the native plants such as St John's wort, plantain and gentian, the 578 plant images include overseas plants that had been introduced into European gardens, such as pineapple, aloe, pepper etc.

Not surprisingly, some images of these plants are clearly based on illustrations from contemporary herbals, some being traced to Bock (1546) and de L'Obel (Lobelius) (1581). Sharp-eyed investigators have found that one image at least is taken from a particular copy of de L'Obel's *Plantarum seu Stirpium Icones* which is today in the State Library at Bamberg.

Reminiscent of a colourful collection of herbarium sheets spread out by a generous archivist this historic ceiling is impressive whether taken as a whole or at the more detailed level of individual plants. Referred to as the Heaven's Garden (Himmelsgarten) its intended religious symbolism is most obvious in the use of red-flowered plants, such as a cactus, nearest the altar. It's clear that this was a region rich in contemporary gardens stocked with exotic plants and herbs. A ceiling such as the Michaelskirche could engender the awe of God's beneficence in the many, while the gardens and herbals were available only to the privileged few.

A good lesson, it seems, for, as I moved on to visit the Upper Parish Church of Bamberg (Obere Pfarrkirche) I found its cathedral-size nave in the midst of decoration for the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Each of the many ornate pew ends had its own freshly gathered herb bound to it and each was marked with its medicinal use. It was a quietly impressive sight. Did I hear someone mutter "For every ill there is an herb", or was I thinking aloud? Possibly these herbs were grown in the modern-day Hesperides gardens that are the well-tended city allotments - small green sanctuaries in the heart of the communities.

Classification and experiments

But to go back to Camerarius, in his Nuremberg garden, where he was experimenting on mulberry and maize and investigating the possible sexual nature of plant reproduction. Although this was guessed at for some time, it was Camerarius who proved it by experiment. This demonstration set the stage for the later transformation of botany by Carl Linnaeus (von Linné) when he used the sexual parts of plants in his great work of classification *Genera Plantarum* (1737) and subsequent works.

Camerarius Florilegium & Herbarium Blackwellianum: Sample of digital images can be seen at this website: www.haraldfischerverlag.de *Hortus Eystettensis*; follow the link at ww.rcpe.ac.uk/library/exhibitions

Photos: Gareth Evans

Above: Historic Nuremberg, a detail of the fourteenth-century Schöner Brunnen (Beautiful Fountain) with the Frauenkirche in the background.

It has been said that by the end of the eighteenth century Nuremberg and London were the most predominant botanical cities in Europe in terms of publications and specialist gardens. This is largely due to the work of Nuremberg physician Christoph Jakob Trew (1695-1769) who was clearly a man with a good eye for promising talent. Among the many important volumes he produced was one that provided a link between the two cities.

The Blackwell connection

The story of Elizabeth Blackwell's *A Curious Herbal* (1736-39) is as sensational as any associated with botanical literature. To rescue her husband from debtors' prison this resourceful woman produced a botanical bestseller by drawing 'from the life' the herbs and medicinal plants then listed by British pharmacopoeias. Engraving the plates herself, she then hand-coloured the resulting 500 illustrations. She had taken good advice and the book filled a need for up-to-date and accurate illustrations of plants then used in medicine. Many of her models were the specimens in London's own version of a walled Hesperides garden, the Chelsea Physic Garden (founded 1673).

This garden today, in addition to the core collection of medicinal plants, has many species of citrus that find sanctuary in the garden's hothouses in winter. Elizabeth's efforts freed her husband who later took up a position in Sweden while Elizabeth stayed in London. Her herbal was pirated in continental Europe until Trew brought out an officially enlarged version in Nuremberg between 1750 and 1760 in five volumes. This publication enhanced her reputation further and it was to be in circulation into the nineteenth century. However in Sweden Alexander Blackwell had apparently involved himself in intrigue that ultimately led to his execution for treason. Linnaeus had previously met Alexander Blackwell and had taken against him; we know of his personal satisfaction at Blackwell's end, while at the same time he invested Elizabeth Blackwell with the title *Botanica Blackwellia*.

A city of ingenuity and craftsmanship, it is perhaps not surprising that Nuremberg went on to be a pioneer industrial city in Germany. One of its first factories was designed appropriately for the mass production of Lebkuchen in the early 19th century. During my visit I stumbled on some objects which seemed to symbolise both the mediaeval settlement that 'grew like a weed' and its subsequent fantastic wealth. Tucked in the corner of the German National Museum (Germanisches Nationalmuseum) are three exquisite solid silver objects skilfully fashioned in the city during the mid-sixteenth century. Their subject is not religious or regal, instead, perhaps they reflect the same simplicity of observation as in Dürer's Great Piece of Turf. They are sumptuous life casts of three simple wayside herbs: marsh marigold, dyer's chamomile and yarrow.

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