

## **The earliest extant work of scientific botany, in its original Latin translation**

Theophrastus, *De historia et causis plantarum libri quindecim ... per Theodorum Gazam in latinum ex graeco sermone versus*. Treviso: Bartolomaeus Confalonarius, 1483. 12 3/8 inches x 8 1/2 inches (314 x 216 mm), 300 pages.

The Greek philosopher Theophrastus (ca. 372–ca. 287 B.C.) inherited the library, garden, and intellectual succession of his master Aristotle. Although Aristotle was a universal scientist and dominated later European philosophical thought, especially in the Middle Ages, the record of his botanical studies is scant and must be reconstructed from incidental references in his surviving works. Of Theophrastus, on the other hand, the essentials do survive, in the form of the *Historia plantarum* and *De Causis plantarum*. Their systematic exposition and accurate detail entitle him to be regarded as the first scientific botanist. As with Aristotle, the work is probably not a finished composition but a compilation of students' lecture notes.

The most famous work of Theophrastus is his book of *Characters*, a collection of brilliant descriptions of stereotypes that inspired generations of imitators, notably La Bruyère. His botanical writings are no less the work of a discriminating observer of salient features, one who can see both wood and trees. Theophrastus has an eye to the foibles of his subject, both human and botanical. He avoids doctrinaire pronouncements: he is endearingly vague about what actually constitutes a plant.

As with the works of many other classical authors first published in the Renaissance, Theophrastus' *De historia plantarum* initially appeared in a usable Latin translation. This Treviso edition of 1483 is the *editio princeps* of the work. (The original Greek text was not published until 1497, when the Venetian scholar-printer Aldus Manutius included it in his edition of Aristotle.) The book's translator, Theodoros Gaza, was a fifteenth-century Greek who spent his later years in Italy. Pope Nicholas V summoned him to Rome to translate the botanical works of Theophrastus, a task that he completed in 1454. The *Catalogue of the library of Albert C. Burrage*

(Manchester, MA: privately printed, 1930) described it as “newly bound” (p. 87). Burrage was a wealthy lawyer and orchidologist, owner of the finest collection of tropical orchids in North America. His remarkable library was especially rich in orchid literature but was also notable for its coverage of horticulture and botany in general.

This copy from the Chicago Botanic Garden Library is bound in early twentieth-century brown morocco and bears the Massachusetts Horticultural Society bookplate “Gift of Albert Cameron Burrage [1859–1931], June 28, 1931,” but was received from the Burrage estate, according to a pencilled note, only in August 1941. This copy lacks the six-leaf index, but the text is complete.

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