

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Ancient Medicinal Herbs

The Book Club of California should be rightfully proud of its fall sponsorship of "The Garden of Health" by Ellen Shaffer, one of the most outstanding books of the past few years. The author had made a study of two famous herbals - the "Gart der Gesundheit" and "Hortus Sanitatis", before publishing such an account of early day medicines and herbs.

"These picture books of our medieval ancestors, with their naive but spirited woodcuts and odd concepts, are more than curiosities; they represent the science of botany and medicine in its infancy and as such must command the respect and admiration of a latter age. When these two books were published late in the 15th Century, printing, too, was in its infancy. Thus, we see in Gart and Hortus a representation of both knowledge and art emerging from the Middle Ages toward a more sophisticated era." The introduction informs us.

The result of Ellen Shaffer's present book is a delightful excursion into a world that existed 500 years ago, a world of physicians, botanists, necromancers, some learned, some abjured, but all of absorbing interest. Miss Shaffer is the rare book librarian of the free library of Philadelphia. She has long been a student of medieval books, so we are informed in the introduction. A few years ago, the Book Club presented her scholarly essay on the Nuremberg Chronicle. To this present book she brings all her talents and knowledge with equal skill and felicity. It is written not only for the other scholars, but for laymen to enjoy

Adding interest and value to "The Garden of Health", each copy has inserted an original leaf from the edition of "Hortus Sanitatis" printed by Johann Pruss in Strasburg in the year 1499. Every leaf bears one or more woodcuts.

There are 38 reproductions of woodcuts taken from 15th Century editions of the old herb books. These tell of "familiar flowers and exotic plants, common minerals and priceless gems, of domestic animals and fabulous monsters - -all of which effect the health of man for good or ill.

To give our readers an idea of what this interesting book contains, we repeat a few of the paragraphs.

"Spinach is beneficial for disorders of the chest and lungs - one more good reason for eating it. The columbine, *Usir* (?), is gracefully portrayed and the central blossom does indeed resemble five doves whose beaks are touching, and from the Latin word for dove (*columba*), the flower today takes its name. No mention is made of this resemblance, one of the names mentioned in the text. "*Aquileya*," harks back to its supposed likeness to the eagle, and as *aquilegia* the genus is known today. The columbine is said to be valuable in the treatment of fistulas and tumors.

"Wine, pictured by a 15th Century gentleman seated at a table looking reflectively at the goblet he raises in his hand, gains almost universal praise from all the authorities quoted, but they do utter warnings against too much.

"*Asparagus* cures toothaches and soothes the stomach." Next to the last plant described in the section relating to herbs is the *zua* or *muza* tree with Adam and Eve pictured at either side.

"We also noted that such substances as oil, water, and vinegar were represented by the containers in which they were ordinarily found in an apothecary shop."

The Garden of Health was printed by Lawton Kennedy of San Francisco in a limited edition of 300 copies (the total number of original leaves available), and the price was \$12.50 to members of the Book Club of California. The Club informs the membership that the woodcuts on the inserted original leaves very naturally differ both in character and sometimes in size; so, it was arranged that each book be wrapped and sealed at the printers. Thus, no member had an advantage over another. It was a grab bag affair, and we are happy with the antique example we received.