Colchicum autumnale from *Het Cruydtboeck* by Rembertus Dodonaeus

The cover illustration (fig 1) shows a woodcut representing colchicum autumnale from the famous *Cruydtboeck* (Herbal) by Dodonaeus. Nowadays, Rembertus Dodonaeus is considered to be the founder of modern botany. He was born in 1517 in Mechelen, at that time an important Flemish town and judicial capital of the Netherlands. After graduating in medicine at the University of Louvain at the age of 18, Dodonaeus returned to his native town to work there as a general physician. He had a special interest in botany and began describing in detail the external appearance, inflorescence, flowering time, and medical properties of herbs and plants. This meticulous work resulted in 1554 in the publication of the famous Flemish herbal *Het Cruydtboeck*. The book contains descriptions of more than 1000 herbs and plants and is illustrated with 715 woodcuts based on drawings by Peter van der Borch. Later, the book was translated into Latin in order to reach a larger public.

The work of Dodonaeus was an inspiration to two other famous physician-herbalists in the early 16th century, Clusius (1526–1609) and Lobelius (1538–1616), who expanded and improved his work. From 1574 until 1577 Dodonaeus was the personal physician of Emperor Maximilian at the imperial court of Vienna. In 1582 he was nominated professor of medicine at the Leiden University in Holland where he died in 1585. Until Linneaus (1707–1778) introduced the new classification of plants in 1735, *Het Cruydtboeck* remained a standard not only as a botanical work but also as a pharmacopoeia, and was improved and reprinted several times.

Colchicum autumnale (meadow saffron) was already known to the ancient Greeks for its beneficial effect on podagra, but also for its toxicity. The active components, the alkaloids, are extracted from the seed as well as from the tuber. Strikingly, the plant flowers in autumn, hence the specification “autumnale” in its name. Colchicum is said to refer to the Greek region Colchis, near the Black Sea from where the flower originates. Some even speculate that the sorceress Medea, daughter of the King of Colchis, used colchicum autumnale as a poison to kill her children as a revenge for the adultery of her husband Jason.

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