

# Leonhart Fuchs (1501 – 1556)

Leonhart (or sometimes spelled Leonhard) Fuchs was born in Wending, in the Duchy of Bavaria, on 17 January 1501. His father, a prosperous burgomaster, died when Leonhart was five. Leonhart was sent to a school in Heilbronn, and by the time he was fifteen was studying at the University of Erfurt. Two years later, with an arts degree, he opened a school in his hometown, but within a year had enrolled at the University of Ingolstadt to study medicine.



## ***Fuchsia procumbens***

The *Fuchsia* genus contains 100–110 species, the majority native to South America, with a few through Central America to Mexico, one in Tahiti and at least three in New Zealand. Most fuchsia are shrubs or small trees, but the New Zealand kōtukutuku (*Fuchsia excorticata*) is an exception, growing up to 12–15 metres tall. *Fuchsia procumbens*, tōtara or creeping fuchsia, is another anomaly – it scrambles along the ground or over other small plants. Unlike the pendulous red flowers of other species, it bears small, upright yellow flowers that lack petals, have startling blue pollen and develop into unusually large pinkish-red fruits that contain fewer, larger seeds than other fuchsia species. First discovered by Richard Cunningham at Matauri Bay in 1834, it is now known from only a few localities between North Cape and the Coromandel Peninsula, and is in danger of becoming extinct in the wild.

He took his degree and after practising as a doctor in Munich from 1524 to 1526 he returned to Ingolstadt with his new wife Anna Frieldberger, to teach in the faculty of medicine.

In 1528 Prince Georg, Margrave of Brandenburg, summoned Fuchs to Ansbach to teach at a new protestant university he hoped to establish there. It didn't eventuate, but Fuchs spent the next seven years as the Margrave's personal physician. Then, in 1535, he accepted an invitation to teach and help reform the university at Tübingen. He remained there for the rest of his life, living in a former 14th century nunnery. In the garden he grew many plants, later described in *De Historia Stirpium*, which he began shortly after his arrival; he also offered botanical field days where he could demonstrate medicinal plants *in situ* to students.

He turned down a post at Copenhagen's planned university on the grounds of his wife's pregnancy, his many small children and the large number of books he could not leave behind. *Historia*, when it came out in 1542, contained illustrations, descriptions and uses of more than 500 plants, with drawings and wood blocks made under his direction. Many of the plants were German or middle European, and a hundred, including some imported exotics, were illustrated for the first time. Fuchs, averse to travel, had only a vague idea where they originated, but was very proud of his work, which spared "neither expense nor labour".

Two years after the book's publication Fuchs declined the offer of a lucrative teaching position at the University of Pisa – he had started on another project, one much more ambitious than his manual on medicinal plants, and he spent the last 24 years of his life on it. From his base at Tübingen, with seeds and specimens from a network of contacts, he gradually built up a treatise of more than 1500 plants in three massive volumes. However, it was never published – the capital outlay for materials was apparently too daunting for the publishers!

Leonhart Fuchs died in Tübingen on 10 May 1556, predeceased by his wife about three years earlier. He was 55 years old. Nearly 150 years later French botanist Charles Plumier named a plant after him. *Fuchsia triphylla flore coccinea*, which Plumier discovered in 1696-97 on Santo Domingo in the Caribbean, was described and published in his *Nova Plantarum Americanarum Genera* in 1703. "Fuchsia" is also the vivid purplish-red colour of the sepals of a typical fuchsia flower.