

Jacobus Theodorus (1525 – 1590)

Jakob Dietrich, Jacob Theodor and Jacobus Theodorus are among the numerous name variations of the Renaissance physician, herbalist and botanist better known as Tabernaemontanus. The latter is a translation into Latin of his native town Bergzabern – "mountain inn" or "mountain tavern" in English. Although the year of his birth is usually given as 1525 it is uncertain.

Jacob Theodor was born in Bergzabern, a small town in Germany near the southern border with France. He would have been exposed to botany as a pupil at the Lutheran school in Strasbourg opened in 1524 by Otto Brunfels (1488–1534). Lawyer Nikolaus Gerbel had drawn Brunfels' attention to the healing power of plants, motivating him to make further botanical investigations and later to study as a doctor. The genus *Brunfelsia* in the family Solanaceae (the nightshades), which includes the garden shrub commonly known as "yesterday, today and tomorrow", is named after him.

From 1538 Jacob Theodor worked periodically as a herbalist in Weissenburg before studying medicine at Padua in northern Italy and later in Montpellier, France, with Guillaume Rondelet. However, with the plague in Montpellier and only three students left in the medical faculty by 1543, he returned to Weissenburg to work as a herbalist again. His first publication *Gerwisse Practick* was advice on treatment of the plague. He became a student of Hieronymus Bock (Tragus) who was also inspired by Brunfels. Bock, a botanist, physician and theologian, pioneered the transition from medieval to modern botany by classifying plants into herbs, shrubs and trees, and within each group by appearance, rather than alphabetically by name. The grass genus *Tragus* and spurge genus *Tragia* are named after him.

Like others before him, Tabernaemontanus was supported by a series of placements as court physician to German nobles. Later he served as town physician to the independent city of Worms. In 1562 he enrolled as Jacobus Theodorus at the University of Heidelberg, as his studies at other European universities were not recognised in Germany, and in 1573 he received his doctorate in medicine. He became professor of botany at the university and personal physician to the prince elector, and spent his remaining years in Heidelberg. He was said to have married three times and fathered eighteen children.

Tabernaemontani (Linnaeus 1733), a large genus of tropical flowering shrubs and trees in the family Apocynaceae (milk trees) commemorates him. One of the three species named after him, *Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani* in the Cyperaceae family is found throughout the world, including New Zealand, where it has been erroneously referred to by other names.

Tabernaemontanus had worked on a herbal for most of his life, but the cost of publication was beyond his means. Due partly to the generosity of the Count Palatine Frederick III and of the Frankfurt publisher, Nicolaus Bassaeus, it finally appeared in 1588 as the *Neuwe Kreuterbuch* (New Herbal Book). It was a massive work, with over 2,300 woodcut illustrations and 3,000 plants aptly described, with the emphasis on the medical more than the botanical aspects. It has been reprinted numerous times, and its relevance to the present day is still being explored by medical herbalists. University of Canterbury PhD student, Swiss-born Sandra Clair, has undertaken a project to translate the 1588 book from early German to modern German and eventually to English – more than a lifetime's work!



Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani

Schoenoplectus (Greek *schoinus* 'a rush'; *pleko* 'plait', alluding to its mat-forming rhizomes) is a worldwide genus of about 30 species of sedge. *Schoenoplectus tabernaemontani* (synonym *Schoenoplectus viridis*) is a tall, creeping rush-like plant up to 1.6 metres or more high. Its grey-green stems are rounded or slightly three-sided and may be as thick as a finger. The flower clusters appear to be below the tips of the stem because a stem-like bract at their base projects above them. Coastal to montane, it grows mostly in standing water in brackish or freshwater systems in North, South and Chatham islands, and is found throughout the world. Known as *kōpuku*, *kuta* or *koawa*, the species was and still is important to Māori for weaving, flooring and raft making.