

# Monthly Letter May/June 2010

## Seeds and bulbs; eighteenth-century gardening overseas



Since the Ice Saints (11-15 May) have left the country by now, it seems to be the right moment for sowing and planting and for paying attention to gardening overseas in the eighteenth century. In *NRC Handelsblad* (September 2006), Roelof van Gelder mentioned the discovery of captured seeds, which surprisingly germinated despite their age of 203 years. The seeds were found in the wallet of a merchant, Jan Bekker Teerlink, who was on his return voyage from Asia to the Republic of the Netherlands. During the usual stop-over at Cape of Good Hope, he gathered these seeds to take back home, but unfortunately his personal archive, including the seeds, was confiscated.

## Seeds sent to the Netherlands

Although we ourselves did not find any seeds in our corpus of letters up till now, we sometimes come across remarks about seeds that were included in a letter. For example, Anna Maria van der Sluijs-Tulleken sent letters from Demerara (in present Guyana) to her sister Tamar and her daughter Catootje in the Netherlands. These letters, dated January 1781, were accompanied by seeds, although it is not clear from which plant. Anna Maria only gives a brief description of the plant and writes that its fruit is one of the finest in the area. She expects that the plant will probably bear fruit in a conservatory, but if it will not, the blossoming in itself is very lovely and sweet-smelling. The seeds should be sown in manure, mixed with timber ashes and the plant's long vines should be trained like the passion flower. In Demerara the long vines were sometimes used for building summer houses.



Seeds from *Datura discolor*, picture: Dick van Aalst, RU Nijmegen

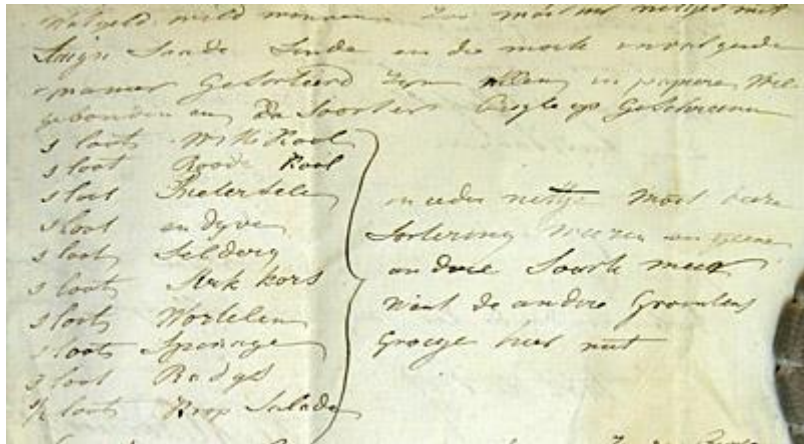
Anna Maria runs a coffee and sugar plantation and frequently sends these products and curiosities like a hummingbird's egg to her relatives in the Netherlands. In the near future she will send some of the fragrant 'menaquaj' nuts, which are also unknown to us. These nuts are a tried and tested remedy against dysentery. After purification of the bowels by rhubarb, a pinch of scrapings of the nuts should be taken three or four times a day, together with some warmed red wine.

## In the vegetable garden



We suspect that people overseas were driven by curiosity and enthusiasm to introduce unknown plants and fruit to the stay-behinds in Europe. On the other hand, they also received seeds from the Republic, but the motives differed and could be linked to preference for familiar food. Sister Tamar sent garden seeds to Anna Maria van der Sluijs-Tulleken, but not all of them were successful in Demerara. Yet, the seed of green and sugar peas was excellent, but once germinated, they were attractive food for West Indian rats. Due to these rats, Anna Maria was left with only five or six plants, which she regretted deeply.

On 15 November 1780, Balthazar Ortt, living on the island Saint Eustatius, orders a large amount of garden seeds from his mother. Although his mother is one of the upper-crust, she clearly could use some pocket money, for Balthazar promises her a sweet profit. He orders white and red cabbage, parsley, endive, garden cress, carrots, spinach, radish and lettuce. Apparently, she sent him gardens seeds earlier, for Balthazar asks for just these varieties; other vegetables would not grow at Saint Eustatius. Furthermore many inhabitants, born at the island, would not be willing to try any unknown vegetables.



Balthazar Ortt's list

### Cursed squirrels and a blasted Greek



Camellia sinensis

Camellia sinensis intended to send to his cousin Bolte was stolen by a blasted Greek. This camellia may have been a japonica or the teashrub Camellia sinensis (as shown in the picture), since tea is still cultivated in Turkey nowadays.

Alas, some promises can never be redeemed. Listen to the sad experience of Cornelis van Brakel, living in Smyrna (the present Izmir in Turkey). On 20 October 1780 he writes to his cousin R. Carter in The Hague about his intention of sending him some charming flower seeds as well as some very rare bulbs. Unfortunately, however, the seeds and the bulbs, stored in the attic of a summer cottage, were eaten by squirrels. Cornelis curses the squirrels, which must have been a thorn in his flesh. This experience is a pity for him, but also for us who would like to know the name of the rare bulbs. It is unlikely that Cornelis meant tulips, which were well-known in the Republic since the end of the sixteenth century. Apart from the squirrels, Cornelis has to endure another misfortune: the

West Indian rats, squirrels and a stealing Greek, how many setbacks can a person endure? But still, we slave away in the garden, as in those days, and always with fresh courage and hope, for next year things will be better!

The letters are respectively found in box HCA 30-330, HCA 30-331, HCA 30-321 and HCA 30-318. The comment on this monthly letter is written by Tanja Simons.