

## Columella *Res Rustica* X and XI: *De cultu hortorum*, Take Two

Columella's *Res Rustica* is a Neronian-era agricultural treatise in 12 books, all prose save book 10, a poetic book on gardening modeled on Virgil's *Georgics*. Columella says that he chose to write book 10 in verse at the request of Publius Silvanus, otherwise unknown, to whom all the books of the *Res Rustica* are dedicated, and who had asked Columella to write about gardening in verse in order to "complete" the allegedly unfinished *Georgics* (10. Pr. 3): in the Corcyrean gardener episode in *Georgics* 4, Virgil says that he would like to discuss gardening but declines due to lack of space, indicating that he will leave this task to posterity (*G.* 4. 147-148). Columella positions *Res Rustica* 10 as a completion, even a fifth book of the *Georgics* (10. 2, 5); he explicitly quotes from or alludes to each of the four books of the *Georgics* in his proem (10. 3-4) and structures books 1-9 of the *Res Rustica* in ways that reflect the *Georgics*' overall thematic arrangement. Book 10 was originally planned as the end and capstone of the work: in addition to the overall thematic consistency of the first ten books, culminating in a poetic book on a subject explicitly omitted by Virgil in the *Georgics*, Columella indicates in the preface to book 10 that it completes his treatise (10. Pr. 1.1). Moreover, in the preface to book 11, he states that the eleventh book will exceed his original plan (11. 1. 2).

So, to his originally planned work in ten books Columella added two additional (prose) books. The 12<sup>th</sup> book deals with the duties of the *villica*, the steward's wife. It concerns preservation and preparation of the produce described in the previous books and feels like an epilogue, particularly since Columella suggests at the end of book 11 that he is planning to append a table of contents to that book. What about book 11 itself? It is a thematically disparate book which, after a brief introduction (11. 1. 1-2), falls into three apparently unrelated sections: on the duties of the *villicus*, the steward or bailiff (11. 1. 3-32); on weather-signs and the dates

when specific farming tasks should be accomplished (11. 2. 1-101); and, once again, gardening—but this time in prose (11. 3. 1-65). Columella opens book 11 by relating that a certain Claudius Augustalis had asked him to write a prose treatise on gardening, but that he had put this off when responding to Silvinus' persistent request to treat the subject in verse (11. 1. 1).

How do Columella's two treatments of gardening—one in verse, one in prose—compare with one another? In both cases he starts with the need to mark out, surround, and prepare the field (10. 6-33; 11. 3. 2-13). The prose treatment is far longer and far more detailed than the poetic one. In verse he deals with the enclosure of the plot in merely two lines: *Talis humus vel parietibus vel saepibus hirtis / Claudatur, ne sit pecori, neu pervia furi* (10. 27-28). In the prose section, by contrast, he begins straightforwardly and proceeds to discuss the matter in greater detail: *Vetustissimi auctores vivam sepem structili praetulerunt, quia non solum minorem impensum desideraret, verum etiam diuturnior [...] permaneret: itaque vepris efficiendi consitis spinis rationem talem reddiderunt....* (11. 3. 3ff.). He goes on to relate at greater length than in book 10 the times of year when tasks must be done and also names particular plants more specifically than he does in the poetic section, where he has to consider what would fit the meter (cf. *pastinaca* at, e.g., 11. 3. 35, a term he avoids in book 10). When discussing various kinds of brambles, in verse he prescribes: [...] *nec cruribus aequa / Terga rubi, spinisque ferat paliuron acutis* (10. 21-22). But in prose he is more expansive: *Ea sint vastissimarum spinarum, maximeque rubi et paliuri et eius quam Graeci vocant kunosbaton, nos sentem canis apellamus....* (11. 3. 4ff.). He includes some of the same words in both treatments where possible, but book 11 can include words excluded from book 10 by metrical necessity.

In book 10 Columella frequently deploys mythological references and other poetic tropes (e.g. *Pierides tenui deducite carmine Musae*, 10. 40), which he completely avoids in prose in

favor of references to various authors on farming (e.g. Democritus, 11. 3. 2.) and alternate plant names (cf. 11. 3. 42).

Columella treated gardening in verse in response to a request and to pick up the “challenge” left by Virgil in *Georgics* 4, and does so creditably; but in book 11 he discusses gardening in greater detail, as in the rest of his treatise, free from the verbal, thematic, and poetic constraints of verse.