

*Nicotiana*

*Solanaceae*

*Nicotiana* (and the name of the drug Nicotine) commemorates a French scholar and diplomat Jean Nicot (1530-1600) who was a French Ambassador to the Portuguese Court in Lisbon from 1559-1561. While working for the Keeper of the King's Seal Nicot came to the notice of Henri II (1519-1559) who made him his private secretary. In 1559 he was sent as an ambassador to Portugal to negotiate marriage between Henri's daughter, Marguerite de Valois (1553-1615) and the King of Portugal (who was then five, a year younger than Marguerite) but this alliance did not materialise. Nicot returned to France in 1561. He compiled one of the first French dictionaries, *Thresor de la langue françoise tant ancienne que moderne*.

In Nicot's penultimate year in Lisbon he sent tobacco as snuff, leaves and seed grown in his Portuguese garden to Catherine de Médicis (1519-1589) then Queen of France. Her majesty took the snuff to treat her migraine which was sufficiently eased by it that she christened it *herba regina* ('the queen's herb'). But authorities suspect they were collected from plants that may well have been the less potent *Nicotiana rustica* (introduced from what is now Florida in the southern United States) and this gift seems to have received a far less rapturous reception (except perhaps medicinally) than that witnessed nineteen years later for the more potent species *Nicotiana tabacum*. This latter tobacco was introduced to the French Court by André Thevet an ex-Franciscan monk. In 1556 he had imported seeds of it from today's Rio de Janeiro in Brazil and grew plants in France from them. By 1579 he was able to prepare the tobacco that was smoked with enthusiasm by men and women alike. However Thevet was destined to experience little recognition for his gift despite the initial rapid popularity in which tobacco was embraced. He felt bereft of any credit because of the activities of his diplomat countryman Nicot – not least for the fact that the latter gave the plant his own name. The two men entered into a battle of words in which Thevet was ultimately unsuccessful. The verbal fisticuffs (some of which were published and which were conducted in the glaring light of the publicity of that time) were to no avail. For whatever reason 150-odd years later Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) the celebrated Swedish naturalist and physician, was to christen plants in the tobacco genus *Nicotiana* when devising his binomial nomenclature for the plant kingdom. Perhaps Monsieur Thevet might be less saddened by the outcome today in view of the increasing social disapproval of tobacco now emerging in the Western World.