

Spring tonics: traditional roots and greens for the seasonal change

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Traditionally, the days around the Vernal Equinox (mid to late March) and the month(s) after it were seen as a time of intense, rushing energy: days get longer and the sunlight more intense, the first signs of green growth emerge, and wildlife stirs again. Herbalists still consider this a time when the more inward, ‘congealing’ energies of Winter begin to transition into the more outward, ‘expansive’ energies of Summer – and when a little attention paid to the process can improve vitality, strengthen digestion and immunity, and keep us in tune with the changing seasons.

There are specific herbal allies that have gained a deserved reputation for aiding in this transition, and each has its own peculiar “virtues” and affinities. All, however, rely somewhat on two basic strategies: either enhancing digestive and eliminative function, or bolstering the power of the body’s immune and hormonal systems. Some do both! And generally, it was (and still is) considered a good idea to start with enhancing absorption and elimination, and then proceed with strengthening the underlying physiology.

The old recipes for “root beers” can be somewhat instructive in this regard: they often feature a combination of bitter roots (which enhance elimination) coupled with aromatic, sometimes pungent ingredients (which improve digestion) and hormonal tonics (to enhance energy and vitality). Many of the herbs and botanicals listed below can be combined along these lines to make a customized spring tonic for yourself or your friends and family, helping to ride along the tides of Spring and get ready for Summer.

The last detail in the herbalists’ crafting of vernal concoctions is an attention to the constitution and physiological peculiarities of the individual using the tonic. Generally, these are pretty obvious considerations – but one point to remember is to try to add “cooling” herbs for those expressing signs of overactivity, heat, and inflammation; and “warming” herbs for those showing signs of sluggishness, depression, chill, and frequent infections. Often eliminative herbs are more cooling, and tonic herbs more warm. Botanicals listed below have their traditional energetic value added as a start in this process.

Tree sap

Often from maples (*Acer saccharum*, and other species), the sap of Birches (*Betula spp.*) can also be used. I like to use the unheated, unfiltered sap as a tonic all by itself: this “tree juice” provides unaltered enzymes as well as sugars and minerals ready for optimal absorption. It can also be used as a base for decocting (simmering) some of the roots and barks described below. Usually, a pint to a quart daily is consumed – though more is not necessarily a bad thing! Alternatively, you can reconstitute a similar liquid by using about a tablespoon of maple syrup per pint of spring water.

Burdock (*Arctium lappa*)

This root, generally cooling in energy though somewhat tonic too, can be eaten as one would a carrot, or simmered into a tonic brew. It is best suited for those with dryer skin, and perhaps an underactive appetite. Its chief traditional use is for acne and other skin complaints. Use about 2 TBS per pint of water, along with other herbs.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)

A true remedy that synergizes well with herbs for almost any ailment, Dandelion is a catalyst for change that gently and safely enhances digestive and eliminative function. When in doubt, this is the root to pick! Its yellow flowers remind us early on that it's time to pay a little attention to our bodies this time of year. The root's energy is somewhat cooling, and it enhances detoxification through the liver, helping to resolve gassiness and sluggishness that may have accumulated after a winter of congestive, thick foods. Use about 2 TBS of chopped root per pint of water.

Yellowdock (*Rumex crispus*)

These roots are more bitter, and are best for those who might have a tendency toward constipation. They combine well with any of the other cooling, bitter roots and improve liver function and elimination. Generally, I suggest using Yellowdock for shorter (1-2 weeks) periods than Dandelion or Burdock, but it is still quite a safe plant. 1 TBS of chopped root per pint is usually adequate to relieve somewhat sluggish digestion.

Echinacea (*E. purpurea*, *E. angustifolia*, and others)

This is a cooling, dispersive root that possesses a good degree of pungency as well. Its chief use as a springtime tonic is to help boost immunity, especially if there are or have been any swollen glands or recurrent respiratory infections associated with winter illness. It can also help dry, scratchy throats that sometimes linger into spring. While I often recommend an extract, the roots are excellent too provided they are simmered for a little while (10-15 minutes). This time of year the plants are just starting to poke up from the soil, making it easy to find and dig out of the garden. Use 2 TBS of chopped root per pint of water.

Wild Sarsaparilla (*Aralia nudicaulis*)

An abundant relative of Ginseng, this plant possesses starches and bitter saponins that counteract fatigue and gently warm the system to enhance vitality and elimination at the same time. It also has hormone-balancing effects, especially in relation to stress hormones, making it a good adjunct for those who have intense work or personal lives, or who rely heavily on stimulants. It is a little difficult to recognize and find early in the season, before the greens emerge, so marking it out in the fall can help with digging the long rhizomes in the spring. Use a piece or pieces of rhizome about the length of your index finger in a pint of water.

Spikenard (*Aralia racemosa*)

Another Ginseng relative, this is a sweet, spicy and warming root that is most indicated as a tonic for hormonal and respiratory function, particularly for those with chronic lung congestion. Use only 1 TBS per pint – it is a potent ally.

Dwarf Ginseng (*Panax trifolius*)

Also called groundnut, this is a nourishing and rebuilding tonic that is somewhat rare in the wild, so it should be used judiciously. It flowers early in the spring, and though only a few inches tall, packs a flavor and power that is quite excellent for warming deficient constitutions that have become sluggish and undernourished over winter. If you find a good stand of it (make sure you have the correct plant ID!), you can have one corymb (a round, underground “bulb” attached to a delicate white root) two or three times a week eaten raw, straight from the forest floor, or simmered into your tonic brew.

Goldthread (*Coptis canadensis*)

This is a very bitter, cooling, detoxifying and anti-inflammatory plant that you really don't need a lot of. Its chief indication is chronic inflammation, perhaps also involving the skin, and a more “oily” skin pattern that could benefit from drying. It enhances digestive function when taken before meals, improves sluggish bowels, and clears heat that settled into joints and muscles over the winter months. Some have reported an improvement in allergies and sensitivities. It is also evergreen, which makes it easy to find even under a little snow cover! Its thin rhizome is bright yellow, and the above-ground greens are useful too. Use one to two plants (4-5 inches of root total) per pint of tonic brew.

Sarsaparilla (various *Smilax* species)

Not a local Vermont plant, the root bark from this vine is still such a classic spring tonic that it bears mention. It has a distinctive, warming and spicy flavor that, while enhancing digestion, is most powerful at adjusting hormonal balance (thyroid, adrenal, and reproductive hormones) and I have always found it useful for stubborn skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis (often worse after the dry indoor heat of winter). Sarsaparilla has a strong flavor, so experiment with taste until you find what you like. It is usually available at the herbs store; start with ½ to 1 TBS per pint.

Sassafrass (*S. albidum*)

The FDA doesn't appreciate the use of this bark anymore, due to its safrole content, which is considered carcinogenic. Its distinctive spicy/sweet and warming flavor and energy make it perhaps the most classic “root beer” ingredient, evoking memories of times when there brews were actually made from plants... And, for a few weeks each spring, consuming sassafrass provides such a negligible amount of safrole that, truly, doesn't compare to pumping gasoline in terms of cancer risk. I would use about 2 TBS of dry bark per pint of brew, but I really like the flavor. Experiment and add to taste.

Cleavers (*Galium aparine*)

This green, as well as its cousin sweet woodruff, comes out a bit later in the spring but makes an invaluable cooling tonic for folks who are prone to swelling from chronic inflammation, edema, or water retention. They can be juiced and an ounce of juice taken as a daily tonic, or steeped into a more complex tonic after roots have been taken off the fire. Use about 2 TBS of chopped herb.

Nettles (*Urtica dioica*)

Though green, this herb is actually a bit warming and drying. It is great for those who show signs of water retention (sometimes evidenced by a swollen, “scalloped” tongue), or those in need of iron and other nutritive minerals. Finally, its mildly detoxifying qualities can help in seasonal allergies. Herbalists use the young, fresh leaves in soups or steeped into an herbal brew after the roots are done simmering – about 2 TBS or more of chopped leaves per day.

Dandelion greens (*Taraxacum officinale*)

We would walk through the meadows, before they fully became green with grass, looking for the young rosettes of dandelions and collecting them whole, along with the crown of the root. Back home, my aunt would dress them with olive oil and wine vinegar, for an abundant (though bitter) spring salad. These greens improve digestion, enhance elimination through the kidneys, and are loaded with important minerals. Their reputation for cooling overheated constitutions extends to the cardiovascular system. They are excellent eaten fresh as part of salads or wilted in soups or stir-fry; alternatively, steep 2 TBS of chopped leaves into an herbal brew after the roots are done simmering.

Mustard greens (*Brassica* species)

There are a wide range of mustards that come up quick in springtime, since they are so tolerant of late frosts. They are warm and spicy, wake up the digestion and liver, and additionally contain compounds that show much promise in preventing and treating cancer. Of course, they are best as part of a wild food salad, or cooked in soups (though they lose a lot of pungency if cooked). I don’t normally brew these into tea.

Wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*)

This is a very aromatic and cooling plant, rich in anti-inflammatory salicylates and endowed with wonderful flavor, another aroma often found in classic root beer preparations. It is a good digestive normalizer, especially if there is a lot of gas, bloating, and irritation; it can also help with chronic inflammatory conditions of the joints and back especially if these get worse over the more sedentary winter months. Steep 5 or 6 fresh leaves in 8oz of herbal brew, covered so as to not lose the volatile aroma, and do not boil!

Birch bark (*Betula* species)

The black birch is perhaps the most flavorful, but the bark of any species yields a wintergreen-like essence that is similarly cooling, and much more readily available. Use a good handful of crushed bark (perhaps a cupful) per pint of water, and add it to your brew for the last two or three minutes of simmering.

A note on preparation

Many of the plants mentioned above release their medicinal constituents during a process of light simmering, known as “decocting”. The resulting brew is often called a “decoction”. It is best accomplished by simmering the herbs in a stainless steel container, covered, for 15 minutes or so on low heat. Afterwards, the brew can be removed from the heat and more delicate greens added and left in the pot, covered, for another 10-15 minutes or so. Finally, strain the brew and drink immediately, or bottle for 1-2 days.