

# Classic Spring Tonics

According to TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) spring is the season of the Wood Element and the Chinese Liver/Gall Bladder organs (different from our anatomical liver and gall bladder!) and meridians. This element and organ pair is associated with upwards moving energy and movement in general, growth, clear vision and purpose, decisiveness, ambition, and new beginnings and plans. When the Liver/Gall Bladder and Wood Element are in balance we will see these qualities reflected in a balanced way within ourselves, on both a physical and mental/emotional level. In the spring we can see these actions and influences happening in nature all around us (and often feel them within ourselves!) with buds opening, sap running, plants bursting forth from the ground, melting rivers of snow, new growth and renewal of life. Using appropriate foods, herbs and daily practices, we can harmonize with these natural influences in nature, and take full advantage of the gifts this season has to offer.

In traditional American folk medicine and traditional western herbalism, spring is associated with “spring cleaning” and the organs and systems of elimination and detoxification- including our liver, gallbladder and entire digestive system, the lymphatic system, kidneys and urinary system, and skin. Health issues often start from weakness and imbalances in these systems due to accumulated toxins, stagnation, environmental pollutants and chemicals, inappropriate food choices for a person’s constitution or the season, and much more. Keeping digestion and elimination strong is paramount to good health. After a long, slow winter full of inactivity, heavy foods and cold weather, these systems can often use some revitalizing and renewal, and the spring is the ideal time to wake them up!

These two perspectives can really be thought of as the same side of the coin, since many of the foods, practices and herbs classically used in our western tradition of herbalism and folk medicine for spring cleaning and detoxification are also very beneficial to the Wood Element and Liver/ Gall Bladder pair. The two systems work wonderfully together.

- **Food Energetics-** Eat light. Lightly cooked, more raw than any other season. NOT a time for heavy, fried, and salty foods. Food should be cooked very lightly (if at all) on high heat for a short time, so the food is *not* thoroughly cooked. A quick sauté with a small amount of oil, fast steam of veggies, etc. Eat foods that emphasize aspects of *yang*- upward moving, rising and expansive. Young shoots of plants just emerging from the ground and all the wild spring edibles have this energy. Maple sap is a classic spring tonic that really epitomizes this. Avoid cold foods right out of the fridge and iced beverages- food should be room temp or warm. Warm water sipped on throughout the day is very detoxifying and an excellent choice this time of year or, even better, add a slice of lemon to each cup.

- Flavor- In TCM it is said that the sweet and pungent (spicy/aromatic) flavor have upward-moving, *yang* energy, and that eating this flavor helps harmonize one with the seasonal influences of the spring that we mentioned above. However, in TCM organ/ element correspondences, the sour flavor is assigned to the Chinese Liver/Gallbladder, Wood Element and the spring. Western herbalism and American folk tradition connects the bitter and sour flavors with the liver, digestive organs and the spring. I mention this not to confuse things, but to simplify, and show that it is not just a “this or that”, either/or situation when we are thinking about flavors for the spring! It’s important to remember that very few plants have just one true flavor. Many plants are both bitter *and* pungent- take Bee Balm (*Monarda sp*) for example, Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), Peppermint (*Mentha piperita*), Spearmint (*Mentha spicata*) or any of the culinary herbs such as Basil, Rosemary, Oregano, Sage, Thyme, Parsley, Cilantro, and Dill. These are all wonderful herbs for the spring and among the first to come back in the garden! Also, some herbs are sour *and* bitter- Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*) and Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon flexuosus*) are good examples of this. In terms of getting that sweetness in- we’re not talking sweet like sugar or really even honey. This is that mild sweetness found in many greens, especially in the spring when that *yang* energy is the strongest. Remember that many greens are sweetest in the spring (while still definitely containing *some* bitterness) before they become more bitter in the summer. In terms of domesticated species, the Brassicas like kale and collards, and spinach and some mustard greens really exemplify this. In terms of wild greens, Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinalis*) and Yellow Dock (*Rumex crispus*) are both good examples.
- Best Foods- With foods it easiest to think in terms of sticking with the bitter and sour flavor to keep things simple! These flavors are cooling, tonify the liver and digestive system, and promote the secretion of bile, saliva and other digestive enzymes and fluids within the body. Examples of foods with the bitter flavor include kale, collards, spinach, dandelion lvs, mustard greens, lettuce, radicchio, and escarole and frisee (both cultivated varieties of endive that can be eaten cooked or raw). Examples of food with the sour flavor include vinegar (raw apple cider is best- be sure to dress your raw greens with a vinaigrette for better digestion and nutrient absorption), citrus fruit, berries, sour apples, yogurt, kefir, sauerkraut, kombucha and many other fermented foods. A simple slice of lemon in your water during the spring will work wonders! Asparagus is a spring tonic that has the definite upward-moving yang energy of the spring while having a soothing, demulcent effect on our urinary tract, and is a strong diuretic- very detoxifying to the kidneys and urinary system. Another excellent food to include this time of year is raw beets, which are excellent for the liver, but just be sure not to do too much at once! Grating them in a salad works well.
- Cleanse- Our bodies are already waking-up to the spring, the same as the earth and plants around us, making this the best season for cleansing, detox, and renewal. A good spring cleanse can really set the stage for great health the rest of the year, helping to rid the body of excess toxins, mucous and phlegm, and built-up metabolic waste. If we don’t help our body move out all this accumulation that especially tends to build-up in the winter months, we are more likely to end-up with congestive issues like seasonal allergies and hay fever, food allergies and compromised digestion later in the year. My favorite is a classic kichari cleanse, from the Ayurvedic tradition of medicine. Another idea for a cleanse is to eliminate wheat, dairy and processed sugar for at least week (or longer if you can!) while drinking a nice spring tonic tea, like the “Spring Balance Tea” mentioned below.

- Best Herbs/“Food as Medicine”- All the herbs mentioned above in our “flavor” section are *very* appropriate as spring tonic herbs. Grow them in your garden and start harvesting them lightly as soon as they come up, or get them from local farmers markets, grocery stores, herbal CSAs- wherever you can find them! There are a number of medicinal herbs that can be eaten as spring greens this time of year when their leaves are young and tender, and definitely contain the wild energy of spring. In addition, not surprisingly, these plants all tend to be nutritional powerhouses incredibly rich in trace vitamins and minerals, strengthen our digestion and elimination, and are supportive to the lymphatic system and the role it plays in detoxifying our bodies. This is a great example of using “food as medicine”. Here are some favorites and some details on each:

Nettle Lf (*Urtica dioica*)- You have to cook this one. Can be juiced or blended raw to deactivate the sting. Herbal multi-vitamin rich in calcium, magnesium, iron, protein, vitamin c, folic acid and SO much more. Powerful blood cleanser and lymphatic herb. Wonderful diuretic very cleansing and tonifying to the kidneys. If using dried best made as a nourishing infusion (see recipe below). Add a bit of marshmallow rt (*Althaea officinalis*) if you have a dry constitution.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinalis*)- Entire plant- leaves, flower and flower stems, seeds and roots are edible and very rich in trace minerals and vitamins. Leaves can be enjoyed raw or cooked (delicious sautéed with garlic and olive oil- a traditional Italian dish), same with the flowers. Cook the spring roots like you would carrots, or roast them on low temp in your oven and make a roasted and delicious tea. Probably one of our most famous spring tonics. *Classic* liver herb. The root is cooling, nourishing and gently detoxifying to the liver and very supportive in creating and maintaining good digestive health. Root is high in inulin, a constituent found to be “pre-biotic,” helping promote the proliferation of our body’s own resident probiotics. The leaves are a premier diuretic, so rich in potassium that there is no net loss in the body from the increases amount of urination from its diuretic effects. When combined with the roots, really an excellent spring tonic, and so abundant!

Yellow Dock (*Rumex crispus*)- Although the root is most commonly used in herbal medicine, the leaves are excellent in the spring and are a perfect combination of slightly bitter and sour, making them a great spring tonic. They get too bitter to really enjoy as the weather gets warmer. Cook them mixed with other greens or make an excellent addition to soup. The root is a well-known powerful blood purifier especially helpful when excess toxins are coming out in the skin in the form of eczema, psoriasis, acne, or boils. The root is really best as a tincture since it’s very bitter.

Violet Lvs (*Viola sp*)- Violets are among the first plants to really come back in the spring and the leaves and flowers are not only delicious in salads, they are also very rich in trace vitamins (esp vitamin A and C) and minerals. Additionally, this diminutive little plant is a powerful lymphatic tonic, helping the lymph do its job of removing waste and unwanted materials from the body. The leaves also make a nice tea and should be made nourishing infusion-strength.

Poke Rt (*Phytolacca americana*)- This plant is what we call a low-dose medicinal, meaning you use just a few DROPS of the tincture as a dose. But in the spring it is a premier wild edible, especially in parts of the south, and an excellent spring tonic. This plant is a powerful lymphatic herb and this is its main use medicinally, the roots being the main part used. However, in the spring the young shoots are eaten as a wild vegetable, and often called “poke salad” or “poke salat”. They

must be simmered in several changes of water before being eaten, but are much-loved and very cleansing.

Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*)- Most often thought of as a remedy for Lyme or as an unwanted invasive plant on the landscape, knotweed had delightfully edible young stalks that are very sour in taste...often used as a wild substitute for rhubarb. Can be munched on raw or cooked-up. Very tonifying to the liver and digestive system and a great choice for spring. Very abundant!

Burdock Rt (*Arctium lappa*)- Most people know burdock for its round seed pods that get stuck to your clothes in the fall! The roots, however, are famous for their blood-purifying effects and are an excellent all-around tonic for the body. In the spring and fall the roots of the first-year can be eaten and prepared like carrots, and are delicious. You can also find them in many grocery stores and the Asian name for them is *Gobo*. It is a deeply nutritive herb that is powerful in its action. Like yellow dock, it is excellent for clearing up skin eruptions, and purging the body of unwanted metabolic waste and substances.

Some other herbs classically used as spring tonics are: Cleavers Herb (*Gallium aparine*), Red Clover Blossom (*Trifolium pretense*), Sassafras Rt Bark (*Sassafras albidum*), Chicory Rt & Lf (*Cichorium intybus*), Chickweed Herb (*Stellaria media*)

- Supportive Practices

- Dry brushing daily

- Daily movement and exercise

- Drink enough water (at least 2 qts/day, best with lemon slices added)

- Plenty of rest (at least 8 hours/ night)

- Visioning/ Planning/ Setting goals for the year

- Purging unwanted "stuff"- emotions, thought patterns and habits, relationships, physical possessions, and so on

- Yoga twist poses aid elimination and detoxification

## ~RECIPES~

### Spring Balance Tea

Dandelion Lf ½ pt

Dandelion Rt 1 pt

Burdock Rt 1 pt

Red Clover Blossom ½ pt

Peppermint 1 pt

Nettles ½ pt

Marshmallow Rt 1 pt

Steep 3 tbsp in 1 quart of just boiled water overnight (at least 4 hours minimum if you forget to do it the night before. Strain, drink throughout the day. Excellent to drink during the spring season or as a part of a spring cleanse.

## Wild Salad

1/2 Organic Mesclun Greens

1/2 Wild!

For the wild part here's what I like to use, in any combination...I usually go pretty heavy on the chickweed and dandelion..... Mix all together, mix in your favorite dressing and enjoy!

Wild Strawberry lf (*Fragraria vesca*)

Dandelion lf + flower (*Taraxacum officinalis*)

Oxeye Daisy lf (*Leucanthemum vulgare*)

Field Garlic lf (*Allium sp*)

Yellow Dock lf (*Rumex crispus*)

Wild Carrot lf (*Daucus carota*)

Bee Balm young tops (*Monarda didyma*)

Violet lf + flowers (*Viola sp*)

Cleavers Herb young tops (*Gallium aparine*)

Garlic Mustard lf (*Aliaria officinalis*)

Chickweed herb (*Stellaria media*)

Day Lily young shoots (*Hemerocallis sp*)

Plantain lf (*Plantago lanceolata or major*)

Chicory lf (*Cichorium intybus*)

Mugwort young tops (*Artemesia vulgaris*)

Sheep Sorrel lf (*Rumex acetosella*)

### Medicinal Use:

In addition to being delicious and incredibly good for you (many of these species are off the charts in vitamins and trace mineral content), wild salad is gently detoxifying, as many of these herbs are classified as liver tonics and/or alteratives, also known as blood purifiers. I consider wild salad to be a spring tonic! The bitter and sour flavors stimulate our digestion and help the liver work optimally and perform its function- just one of many- of clearing the blood of toxins and other unwanted substances. On a side-note, the liver and gallbladder also happen to be associated with spring in Traditional Chinese Medicine, definitely not a coincidence! And alteratives, or blood purifiers, help the body break down and remove metabolic waste, both through our digestive system and urinary system, and are often considered to be all-around "tonics" that promote vitality and good health, so eat up!

### Spring Greens Dressing

2 bunches parsley or cilantro (or 1 bunch each)

1 bunch chickweed

½ bunch Dandelion Greens

1 Bunch Young Nettles

1/3<sup>rd</sup> cup Olive Oil 1/4<sup>th</sup> cup Lemon Juice

2 tbsp Apple Cider Vinegar  
1 tbsp miso  
2 tbsp raw honey  
2 garlic cloves  
Black Pepper to taste

For best results blend in a vitamix to a thick cream. Delicious as a salad dressing or condiment for sandwiches, bread or crackers, grains , meats or veggies. Try a spoonful in a bowl of soup for extra flavor. Enhances the flavor of just about any dish, aids in digestion and provides an extra burst of nutrients to any meal.

### **Steamed Nettle Greens**

Pick the young tops of nettles (about the first 4-6 inches). Wash and steam for 5-10 minutes. Eat as is as a side, add to a side dish of greens, or drizzle with a little soy sauce if desired, and serve. Delicious! Nutritional powerhouse. Rich in protein, iron, calcium, magnesium, vit A, C and more!

### **Kitchari**

- 1 cup white basmatic rice
- ½ cup mung beans
- 6-8 cups water
- 3 tsp ghee (clarified butter)
- 1 tsp coriander or ½ tsp pwd
- 1 tsp cumin seed or ½ tsp pwd
- ½ tsp brown mustard seed
- ½ tsp turmeric pwd
- 1 pinch asafoetida (hing)
- 1 handful fresh cilantro lvs (optional)
- 1 ½ cups assorted vegetables (optional)
- dash of sea salt (to taste)

### **Preparation**

Combine the rice, mung beans and water and cook at a low simmer, covered, for about 20 minutes until the beans become soft. While that is cooking, chop any veggies you are adding (zucchini, sweet potato, carrot, squash, asparagus and any

dark leafy greens are all nice). Add the vegetables to the rice/mung mixture and cook 10 minutes longer. In a separate pan brown the spices with ghee for a minute or two, being careful not to burn them. Lastly, add the browned spices and ghee to the rice/mung/veggie mix. Top with chopped cilantro and a dash of sea salt, and serve!

## Notes

**Ghee** is a digestive aid and increases digestive or metabolic fire (“agni”), improving nutrient absorption and assimilation. It is known to lubricate the joints and connective tissue of the body, increasing flexibility. It also enhances memory.

One can “fast” on just kichari for a safe, nourishing and effective **cleanse**. Since it is so easy to digest, eating just kichari alone for anywhere from 3-7 days will allow the digestive system a much needed break and give the body a chance to remove built-up toxins (“ama”). During a kichari cleanse it is important to maintain proper elimination- helpful aids for this (taken in-between kichari meals) include prune juice, psyllium husks with water and oat bran. Kichari can also just be enjoyed from time to time as a nice, nourishing meal.

**Concurrent therapies** for cleansing include a tea made of cumin, coriander and fennel. 1 tsp: 1 cup water, drinking 3 cups/day. And also triphala as well- ½ tsp pwd: 1 cup room temp water OR 2 capsules 2x/day. Take powder or capsules in morning and evening on an empty stomach.

## Nourishing Infusion

1 oz herb or 1 large handful

1 quart (4 cups) H<sub>2</sub>O

**Directions:** Place the herb in a quart-sized mason jar or other heat-bearing vessel (pan, teapot, etc). Then cover with 4 cups boiling water. Cover and let steep overnight or 4 hours minimum. Strain and for best results drink 3 cups a day.

Keeps 1-2 days in the fridge. The nourishing herbs, are a loose, unofficial category of mineral and vitamin-rich herbs, which give up their properties easily in water.

**Herbs commonly placed in this category include:** Nettle Lf (*Urtica dioica*), Raspberry Lf (*Rubus idaeus*), Violet Lf (*Viola sp*), Chickweed Herb (*Stellaria media*), Oatstraw and Milky Oat Tops (*Avena sativa*), Alfalfa Lf (*Medicago sativa*), Burdock Rt (*Arcticum lappa*), Plantain Lf (*Plantago lanceolata and P. major*), Rose Hips (*Rosa sp*), Dandelion Lf + Rt (*Taraxacum officinalis*), and Red Clover Blossoms (*Trifolium pratense*).

**Why make a nourishing infusion?** This preparation maximizes the extraction of minerals and vitamins from a given plant. An excellent way to weave the herbs into your daily life, this goes above and beyond the nutrition available in most multivitamins. Drinking nourishing infusions daily is one the best form of preventative medicine the herbs have to offer!

## RESOURCES

Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants in Wild (and not so wild) Places

By “Wildman” Steve Brill

Botany in a Day

By Thomas J Elpel

Uses of Plants by the Indians of the Missouri River Region

By Melvin R Gilmore

How Indians Use Wild Plants for Food, Medicine & Crafts

By Frances Densmore

Invasive Plant Medicine

By Timothy Lee Scott

Edible and Useful Wild Plants of the United States & Canada

By Charles Francis Saunders

Stalking the Wild Asparagus & Stalking the Healthful Herbs

By Euell Gibbons

Peterson’s Field Guide to Edible Plants



