

# Spring tonic

Ruth M. Powell MD CCFP FCFP



blue bottle  
on the windowsill  
spring tonic

When we were children growing up in rural Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, there were certain rites that went with each season. There was always that day in spring when we were finally allowed to take our shoes off and go barefoot in the greening grass. What a joy to feel the cool grass and spring breezes on our toes as we watched the gray of late winter disappear and the colours of spring emerge.

Another rite of spring was the spring tonic. I can still recall the brown bottle, and the particular aroma of what was probably a mix of B vitamins, iron, alcohol, and flavouring. We didn't think much about it, probably just grimaced a bit as we swallowed it down and headed outside for more adventures. We certainly didn't think about the origins of spring tonics, or why it was something we took every spring.

So I looked it up. In North America spring tonics go back to the days of the early European settlers. And much longer in Indigenous cultures, I think. After a long, hard winter with a diet of dried beans and grains, dried or salted meat and fish, supplemented with a little fresh meat and root vegetables, people would be deficient in vitamins and minerals. In those days there was no refrigeration as we know it, no mass transportation of fresh produce from California and Mexico, no grocery store with a produce department, and the outdoor deep freeze was unreliable.

The original spring tonics didn't come in a bottle from a physician or pharmacy. The tonics would vary, depending on where you lived. They could be boiled and decocted to make a tea, eaten in a salad, or cooked. A variety of greens and roots were used: dandelion greens, burdock leaves, nettle greens, violet greens, lamb's quarters, purslane, sassafras, sarsaparilla, sweet fern, speedwell flowers and greens, spruce tips, plantain, upland cress, and more. In the Appalachians, sulfured molasses was also given in the spring, along with the greens.<sup>1</sup>

As all my sources point out, these first greens of the spring contain high concentrations of vitamins and trace minerals.<sup>2-7</sup> The long days, the strength of the sun, and the natural locations where the plants grow no doubt all contribute to their nutrient content. But there was something else involved. There was the ritual of going out to the woods and meadows after a long winter, to find nature's gifts, and then the ritual of preparing them as part of getting ready for the change of season.

Although we're still very much a country of seasons, we've lost our close connection with the rhythms of the earth. We can get whatever fresh greens, fruits, berries, and vegetables we want at any time of year, although we might grumble about the price. Imagine grumbling about

strawberries in January! We're bombarded with articles about super foods and toxic foods, and most of us are neurotic about our diets. If we feel sluggish in the winter, we take a pill.

Maybe our ancestors knew something. They knew that winter was a time of darkness, and a slower pace. A time of storytelling and reflection. A time of different growth that we might not see outwardly. But also a time to know and trust that spring would come again, with its life-giving, energizing sunshine and green growth.

I'm not suggesting that we send our patients out in the spring to gather plants that they probably couldn't identify, or that we do so ourselves. Down that path lies frantic calls to Poison Control. But we might do well to recommend to our patients, and ourselves, a regular dose of exposure to nature this spring. Go for a walk in the woods. Leave your activity-tracking devices and app-filled smartphones at home. Don't measure anything or make it a challenge. Just breathe. Try to see, hear, smell, and feel everything around you. The spring smells. The sound of the wind in the trees. A scolding squirrel. Lichen on a rock. Walk until all your worries have stopped doing circles in your mind, and then walk some more. Sit on a fallen log and feel the air. Let yourself relax into it, and the benefits will come to you. In Japan they call this *forest bathing*. We could just call it a walk in the woods. Or a tonic. Forest bathing is known to lower blood pressure, reduce stress, improve the immune system's function, improve mood, increase energy level, and improve sleep.<sup>8,9</sup> The Japanese have already done the studies and garnered the proof, so all we need to do is enjoy.

cottonwood fluff  
hangs in the air  
sunlit trail

wild strawberries  
tumbling me headlong  
into summer

Dr Powell is a family physician in Prince George, BC.

**Competing interests**  
None declared

#### References

1. Tabler D. *Time for a spring tonic*. Appalachianhistory.net; 2015. Available from: [www.appalachianhistory.net/2015/03/time-for-spring-tonic.html](http://www.appalachianhistory.net/2015/03/time-for-spring-tonic.html). Accessed 2018 Feb 5.
2. Foster S. Spring tonics: dandelions and sassafras. *Mother Earth Living* 1999 Apr/May.
3. Spring tonics. *The Old Farmer's Almanac* 2013 Apr 4.
4. Godino J. *Spring tonics*. Sunweed.com; 2002. Available from: [www.sunweed.com/An\\_Article\\_wisewoman3b.htm](http://www.sunweed.com/An_Article_wisewoman3b.htm). Accessed 2018 Feb 5.
5. Finch B. *Spring tonic: it's not what you get, it's how you get it* [blog]. AL.com 2017 Apr 30. Available from: [http://blog.al.com/living-press-register/2010/04/spring\\_tonic\\_its\\_not\\_what\\_you.html](http://blog.al.com/living-press-register/2010/04/spring_tonic_its_not_what_you.html). Accessed 2018 Feb 5.
6. Spring tonics. *Atremis Herbals* 2012 Mar 28.
7. Liivlaid N. 5 Reasons to eat spruce tips and 8 ways to use them. *Nutriplanet* 2014 May 28.
8. Selhub E. Your brain on nature: forest bathing and reduced stress. *Mother Earth News* 2013 Jan 8.
9. Livni E. The Japanese practice of 'forest bathing' is scientifically proven to improve your health. *Quartz* 2016 Oct 12.