

**SOAP, PERFUMERY AND COSMETICS****MARCH COLUMN**

Anthony C. Dweck

**SPRING TONICS**

Imagine the scenario. Your wife has a face like a manila envelope, with skin tired and dingy after the long winter months. The larder is empty, the last of the dried beef has been host to a plague of carnivorous insects and the latest delivery of fresh meat was as skinny as you. The last green thing you ate was growing on the cheese. No this is not the life of a consultant, but that of life in days past.

It is hardly surprising that at the first signs of spring, people took to the countryside gathering all of those things that would restore and replace those vitamins in such short supply. Though the need for "Spring Tonics" is not really a necessity today, it is nonetheless perhaps a pleasurable idea to prepare these herbs for external use.

**COUCH GRASS (*Elymus repens*)**

Couch grass contains vitamins A and B, potassium salts, organic acids and starch, and it has long been used as a tonic in deficiency diseases. It is a diuretic and is good for cystitis and diseases of the bladder, as well as a remedy for gout and rheumatism. The juice was drunk in spring to cleanse the body after a long harsh winter.

**GENTIAN (*Gentiana lutea*)**

Mainly found in the mountains of Europe, it was used medicinally as a tonic and was deservedly one of the most popular of tonic medicines, given for the weakness of the digestive system, female weakness, and hysteria (probably a marketing assistant). It was used as a blood builder during convalescence, since it raised the white blood cell count. It was also used externally as a decoction for washing wounds and the fresh leaves placed on open wounds and inflammations to act as a refrigerant. It also made a soothing footbath, which was presumably quite useful after having slogged about the countryside to look for it.

**CORNFLOWER (*Centaurea cyanus*)**

This was reputedly the favourite flower of the great composer Beethoven and the flower is supposed to bring luck to anybody who sees it, though it did not seem to bring Ludwig much luck with his hearing. Today the cornflower is rarely used in medicine except on occasions as a tonic and stimulant, although the ancient herbalists gave it many uses including its application to the bites of venomous beasts. A preparation known as Eau de Casselunette used to be made from the flowers and many years ago appeared in the Parisian Codex. It was said to be an excellent remedy for the inflammation of the eyes and for dimness of the eyesight.

**ROSEBAY WILLOWHERB or FIREWEED (*Epilobium angustifolium*)**

It is mainly the leaves that are used medicinally. Their constituents include tannins (up to 20%), mucilage, sugars, pectin and vitamin C. Rosebay Willowherb makes a demulcent, astringent and tranquillising infusion which is used to treat headache and migraine. Rich in vitamin C the tea was recommended as a spring tonic. The herb has recently become available to the cosmetic industry for use as an anti-inflammatory in skin care and to reduce skin erythema.

**SARSPARILLA (*Smilax spp.*)**

The rootstock is used which is carminative, diaphoretic, diuretic, and tonic. The root is said to be good for gout, rheumatism, colds, fevers and catarrhal problems, as well as for relieving flatulence. The tea has been used externally for skin problems, including scrofula, ringworm and tetter, and it was considered a good blood purifier. It was another plant taken as a spring tonic by the American settlers, who also considered it a remedy for impotence and a cure for sexual diseases.

**SCURVY-GRASS (*Cochlearia officinalis*)**

As the name suggests, this herb has a high vitamin C content and it was much valued as a defense against scurvy. The bruised fresh leaves were put on slow healing ulcers and an infusion was used against dropsy, arthritis, and chronic skin ailments. In addition to be used as a skin tonic, it was used as a mouth wash against mouth ulcers and bleeding gums.

**WORMWOOD or ABSINTHE (*Artemisia absinthium*)**

This is a potent herb that has been used in various tonic wines and teas and as an aid to digestion. It is also used in the bitter aperitif Campari. It is applied as a diluted tincture, or as a strong tea, or in a compress to heal bruises or ease the pain of falls or accidents.

**CLEAVERS (*Galium aparine*)**

Cleavers was made into a cooling drink every spring to "clear the blood". The juice of the leaves applied to wounds to stop them bleeding and the dried herb was used in much the same way. In rural medicine it was used for jaundice, scarlet fever and measles. The seeds were dried and used as a stimulating substitute for coffee. It is used in homoeopathic medicine for skin diseases such as psoriasis and scurvy. It also makes a hair lotion that clears dandruff; and a strong infusion of cleavers and lovage, when used directly on the skin or in the bath, is a good deodorant according to one reference. Another writer cites the plant for its benefit in lymphatic drainage.

**DAISY (*Bellis perennis*)**

Daisy flowers are infused for use in spring tonic baths for skin that looks tired and dingy and to revive dull skin. The crushed fresh leaves or a decoction can help to heal wounds and bruises (hence the common name bruisewort)

## **DANDELION** (*Taraxacum officinale*)

The salts in dandelion are said to neutralize the acids in the blood and thus act as a blood cleansing or spring tonic. The Chinese use the whole plant in their healing practice, and a decoction is applied to breast abscesses and to boils on other parts of the body. It is a good tonic, and is used in cases of eczema and other eruptions. The juice is applied to remove warts. The American Indians used the split stem and applied it to remove the pain of bee stings. A diet of the greens improves the enamel of the teeth and the roots can be used to make a coffee (which I have tried and it tastes horrible).

## **SPRINGTIME**

We may not need to take spring tonics internally, but our skin has certainly suffered with the cold dry air, the continual exposure to central heating and a general lack of vitality. Maybe there is a place in our society to revive some of the old country habits.