

# Weeds: A Link with the Past

## 3. Tansy

Tansy (*Tanacetum vulgare*) is a tall, robust, aromatic plant with cut leaves and deep yellow flowers, which brightens the meadow and stream edges of the Arboretum in July and August. It is a native of Europe, but was observed in North America in 1748 by the botanist and explorer Peter Kalm. Originally tansy was valued as a medicinal plant; a monk named Walahfrid Strabo mentioned it in 840 A.D. in a Latin poem:

The doctors use it for the power it has  
A draught of it clears away as much blood inside  
As the size of the dose you take of this nourishing brew.

John Gerard, in the 16th century, wrote that cakes were made of it in England in the spring, which were called "Tansies," and he commented, "Which be pleasant in taste and good for the stomacke."

William Coles reported in *The Art of Simpling* in 1656, "Wild Tansy laid to soak in buttermilk for nine days and then applied as a wash to the face has the reputation for making the complexion very faire."

A cookbook published in 1741, *A New and Accurate Treatise of Cookery etc. According to the Politest and most Improved Taste*, gives directions for an elaborate pudding called *A Tansy*. It contrasts markedly with our present-day cholesterol-conscious cooking:

Take twenty yolks, and eight whites of eggs, beat them well and strain them into a quart of thick cream; one nutmeg, and three naples-baskets [biscuits ?] grated, as much juice of spinach, with a little Tansy; sweeten it to your palate, then butter a dish well, and set it in an oven fit to bake custards; watch it, and when it is done take it out and turn it on a pye plate; scrape sugar and squeeze orange over it. Garnish the dish with orange and lemon and serve it up.

The name "Tansy" in many cookbooks of the eighteenth century appears to be a synonym for "pudding." In *A Collection of Above Three Hundred Receipts in Cookery, Physick and Surgery for the Use of all Good Wives, Tender Mothers and Careful Nurses* by "Several Hands," written in 1749, a recipe is given for a baked pudding containing milk, eggs, spinach juice and "As much sugar as will make it very sweet." It contains no tansy, but is titled, *A very good Tansy*. Another book of the same period gives directions for making *An Apple Tansy* which consists of fried apple slices in a sweetened and flavored omelette; and *A Gooseberry Tansy* which is similar but uses gooseberries.

However, the use of the plant as a medicine and a household item continued; it was used to get rid of intestinal worms and to treat gout; it added color and flavor to cheese; and was rubbed into meat to ward off the attacks of the fleshfly. As late as 1819 directions for planting tansy were included in the *Practical American Gardener*.

But our modern tastes do not appreciate the strong honest flavors of the past and tansy is no longer needed by *Good Wives, Tender Mothers and Careful Nurses*.

Helen Roca-Garcia

Summary of weather data recorded at the Dana Greenhouses  
October, November and December 1970.

	Precipitation	Average Daily Temp.
October	2.81	65.2
November	4.54	52.2
December	6.13	25.2



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