

The Wood Element and Foods for Spring

By Piper Dunlap, LAc

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Harmony with the seasons comes as naturally to the balanced person as it does to animals. Most of us, however, have had our instinctual awareness of the subtlety of the seasons blunted by life-style choices, artificial environments and our general cultural disassociation with Nature. In Asia, however, even in the big cities, there remains a fundamental cultural awareness of the cycles and rhythms of the natural world. This awareness lies at the center of Traditional Chinese Medicine and all of the Asian healing arts.

According to the Yellow Emperor's *Classic of Internal Medicine*:

“The principle of the interaction of the four seasons and of *yin* and *yang* is the foundation of everything in creation. Thus, the sages nurture their *yang* in the spring and summer and their *yin* in the fall and winter in order to follow the rule of rules; therefore, unified with everything in creation, the sages maintain themselves continuously at the Gate of Life.”

Sounds great, doesn't it? Has anyone seen a sage around lately who can help me maintain myself continuously at the Gate of Life?

Well, we are lucky here on the Olympic Peninsula because not only do we have a healthy, moderate change of seasons, but we have many practitioners (if not sages) of the Asian healing arts who can help us return our awareness to the cycles of Nature. One way they can do this is by helping us to choose and prepare food in harmony with the seasons.

Since it's just around the corner, let's talk about springtime, the season associated with the Wood Element in Chinese medical philosophy.

Spring is, of course, a time of new beginning. I've always felt that New Year's resolutions are premature and that they should be made around the spring equinox rather than smack in the middle of hibernation, or *yin* time. It is no coincidence that the Chinese New Year is closer to the spring equinox than it is to the winter solstice.

The new *yang* activity of early birds, buds and shoots can be taken as a cue to get up and out, to rise earlier, as the sun does, to walk and to look around at the world in the new spring light. To take in the soothing green color of young plants and grasses helps start the spirit and nourish the soul through the eyes. Vision is the sense associated with the Wood Element of spring. This, in turn, allows the appetite for the heavier, warming foods that have kept us fueled during winter to wane. Salty foods like miso, soy-sauce, and prepared meats and fish are appropriate to the Water Element of winter, with their strong downward and inward nature, but should be used less in the spring.

Spring is a good time for fasting and cleansing. It is “Liver time.” More raw and sprouted foods can be incorporated into the diet as the temperatures rise. Since green is the color of the Wood Element and the Liver, we allow our meals to become greener in the spring. Grains, seeds and legumes, the complex carbohydrates of winter, become greener and sweeter with sprouting, so all manner of sprouts are appropriate food in the spring.

Most of us could use more green veggies in our diets, and, again, we are lucky to live in a climate where many of the dark leafy greens grow all winter. Parsley, kale, watercress, and collards are loaded with chlorophyll, which is only an element away from our all-important hemoglobin - the compound in the blood that makes it red and carries oxygen to our cells. If you're not loading up on the dark leafy greens, the cereal grasses and micro-algae products ("super greens") are another excellent source of spring green energy. Get some advice from a natural healthcare/dietary practitioner, because these supplements are pricey and of varying quality.

Though sour is the flavor associated with the Wood Element, sweet (not sugar, sweet!) and pungent are the flavors to use for seasonal attunement in the spring, as they have an upward and outward effect on the body's *qi*. Use the pungent culinary herbs like dill, caraway, marjoram, basil, bay laurel and rosemary to season the sweet vegetables such as carrots, beets, and parsnips.

In the springtime it is best to cook your food for a shorter time but at a higher temperature, which effectively leaves the inner parts of vegetables raw. "Wok" cooking is perfect for springtime. If you're using water, light steaming or quick simmering is ideal.

So as the spring equinox approaches consider making some dietary changes in tune with the seasons. You'll feel so much better that it should be easy to continue to eat and live with the seasons. Since nature is always changing, we need not impose steadfast resolutions on ourselves, but rather make small easy adjustments that help us feel good and allow us, at least to loiter near the Gate of Life!

Chinese medical nutrition and Five Element Theory encompass a vast and complex body of knowledge which includes specifics regarding the many different constitutions and imbalances. For a reading list, a consultation, or answers to questions, you can contact any of the local practitioners of Chinese Medicine and acupuncture, several of whom advertise in these pages.

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