

# THE STORY OF PLANTS: NASTURTIUM

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MY BARE-FOOTED AUNT NANCY padded out into the garden, her freshly lacquered toe nails glistening orange. She chattered happily about the beauty of the day, keeping her steps small so that I, just 7 years old, could keep up. Then she stopped, plucked an orange flower nearly the color of her dyed hair, and popped it in her mouth. She plucked another and offered it to me. I imitated her, popping the whole flower in my mouth. She laughed warmly as I winced. The peppery pleasure my aunt found in the orange petals burned in my sweet craving mouth. Yet, a nasturtium lover was awakened in me that day.

Eighty-six species of *Tropaeolum*, the nasturtiums, are found from southern Mexico to southern South America. Only a few are found in our gardens. The common nasturtium with its multiple colors and forms arises from the Andean species *Tropaeolum majus* and the hybrids of it with *T. minus* and *T. peltophorum*. A perennial in warmer climates it might be an annual here along with two other commonly grown nasturtiums, *T. peregrinum*, canary creeper, and *T. speciosum*, flame creeper. The perennial *T. tuberosum* 'Ken Aslet' has proven to be a good performer in Northwest gardens. I grow it at the base of an Italian cypress where it stays dry and cloaks the conifer with blue-green foliage, punctuated with scarlet blooms in summer. In Peru, because it produces high yields of edible tubers on very lean soils, it is a

staple among the poor who call it *mashua*. Traditionally, they were only eaten by women and children. The recent discovery of high levels of estrogen in the tubers might explain why.

When I told my partner, Michael, I was writing about nasturtiums, he wrinkled his nose in disgust, like he does when he finds the reptilian seeds soaking in a cup on our kitchen counter. As a northern Californian, common nasturtiums are invasive weeds to him. Sometimes I wonder myself about the prolific reseeding in my own garden. "They're easy to weed," I say each year as the nearly white cultivar 'Milkmaid' takes over another ten feet.

I had not planned on taking up arms to defend the lowly nasturtium, though the name *Tropaeolum* has a militaristic origin. Linnaeus, seeing shields in the leaves and helmets in the flowers, recalled the Greek word *tropaion*, the root of trophy, signifying the shields and helmets of the conquered displayed on the battle field. "Nasturtium" means "nose twister" referring to the pungent compounds in the leaves. Another common name "Indian cress" comes from an earlier link to water cress (*Nasturtium officinale*), a plant with a similar pungency from a different family.

Christopher Lloyd says nasturtiums "should never be underrated." I was surprised how many people do just

that, seeing them as messy, garish, and amateurish. I was amazed how few people said they were easy, pretty, or nutritious. All parts of this edible plant are high in vitamin C. Formerly, sailors would take the pickled green seed pods on long journeys to fight scurvy.

Nasturtiums are also said to have the ability to restore emotional warmth to those drained from an excess of intellectual activity, like writers.

"To love is to resemble," says the Sufi mystic Serif Catalkaya. I have only painted my toe nails orange once and have never dyed my hair, but I always plant nasturtiums. I've grown fond of their peltate (shield-shaped) foliage, like water lilies run aground, and their flowers that seem more like warm laughter than thought. But I am mostly fond of their peppery taste, sweet with memories. 🌱

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