

七草の節句 (*nanakusa no sekku*) “Feast of Seven (Spring) Herbs”

古今和歌集, *Kokin Wakashu* (excerpted from Book I, collected poems of spring themes):

かすがののとぶひののもりいでて見よ今いくかありてわかなつみてむ

み山には松の雪だにきえなくに宮こはのべのわかなつみけり

君がため春ののにいでてわかなつむわが衣手に雪はふりつつ

*kasuga-no no
tobuhi no nomori
idete miyo
ima ikuka arite
wakana tsumitemu*

O watchman of
Beacon Field in Kasuga,
go forth and look now:
how many days will it be
until we can pick the young greens?

author unknown, Book Ia (Spring 1), 18

*miyama ni wa
matsu no yuki dani
kienaku ni
miyako wa nobe no
wakana tsumikeri*

Even though the snow
has not vanished from the pines
in the fair mountains,
in the capital, they pick
young greens in the open fields.

author unknown, Book Ia (Spring 1), 19

*kimi ga tame
haru no no ni idete
wakana tsumu
waga koromode ni
yuki wa furitsutsu*

It was for your sake
that I went to the spring fields
to pluck these young greens,
and all the while the snowflakes
kept falling on my wide sleeve

光孝天皇, Emperor *Koko* (r. CE 884-887), written to accompany a gift of young greens,
Book Ia (Spring 1), 21

It was not unusual to collect and record Japanese poets' works; examples from as far back as the eighth century have been recovered. 古今和歌集 (*Kokin Wakashu*, “Collected Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times”), conventionally abridged to 古今集 (*Kokinshu*), is the first of the 二十一代集 (*Nijuichidaishu*), twenty-one collections of Japanese poetry that were compiled at Imperial behest. *Kokinshu*, containing works from the eighth to tenth centuries, was the first major literary work written in the *kana* writing system and is further notable in being the first comprised nearly exclusively of short form poems called 短歌 (*tanka* “short poem/song” (also traditionally referred to as 和歌 (*waka* “Japanese poem/song”)). This is in contrast to the older 万葉集 (*Manyoshu*, compiled in the seventh century, and the earliest extant anthology of Japanese poetry) which includes both short and long form poems, the latter following the traditional format of then-contemporary Chinese poetry. *Kokinshu* became the standard of poetic knowledge for the educated classes, and such was its influence that

waka remained the canonical format for Japanese poetry through the nineteenth century. *Kokinshu* was conceived by 宇多天皇, Emperor *Uda* (r. CE 887–897), ordered by his son 醍醐天皇, Emperor *Daigo* (r. CE 897–930) in CE 905, and completed approximately ten years later. The compilers of the anthology were court poets, headed by 紀貫之, *Ki no Tsurayuki* and including 紀友則, *Ki no Tomonori*; 凡河内躬恒, *Oshikochi Mitsune*; and 壬生忠岑, *Mibu no Tadamine*. *Kokinshu* contains 1,111 poems divided into six books of seasonal poems, five books of love poems, and single books devoted to various subjects as travel, mourning, and congratulations. Well over half of the poems are attributed; there are nearly 130 named poets, mostly of the late ninth century.

The three poems above (along with additional examples in *Kokinshu*) refer to the harvesting of sprouting herbs that is part of the early spring celebration of 七草の節句 (*Nanakusa no sekku*/Feast of Seven (Spring) Herbs). This very long-standing Japanese custom of eating seven-herb rice porridge (七草粥/*nanakusa-gayu*) on 人日 (*Jinjitsu*/January 7th) to bring longevity and health developed from a similar Chinese custom. Since there is little green at that time of the year, the young green herbs bring color to the table and eating them suits the spirit of the New Year. It will come as no surprise that this literature inspires poetic names and themes used by *chajin*, such as 若菜 (*wakana*/young green herb); 雪間 (*yukima*/lit. “gaps in the snow”, suggesting sprouts growing there; see example below) and the more specific 雪間の草 (*yukima no kusa*/sprouts amidst gaps in the snow), 初草 (*hatsukusa*/first grasses), and 下萌 (*shitamoe*/sprouts). They also inspire sweets like 若菜金団, *Wakana-kinton* (wagashi styled after young green herbs; *kinton* of white and green).

The *nanakusa* are seven edible wild herbs of spring. Common local herbs are sometimes substituted as needed, but they are traditionally:

- 芹 (*seri*/water dropwort, *Oenanthe stolonifera*)
- 薺 (*nazuna*/shepherd's purse, *Capsella bursa-pastoris*)
- 御形 (*gogyo*/cudweed, *Gnaphalium affine*)
- 繁縷 (*hakobera*/chickweed, *Stellaria media*)
- 仏座 (*hotokenoza*/nipplewort, *Lapsana apogonoides*)
- 菰 (*suzuna*/turnip, *Brassica rapa*)
- 蘿蔔 (*suzushiro*/daikon, *Raphanus sativus*)



雪間