1. The Plantain

Many of the common weeds found in the Arnold Arboretum were once known as useful plants, worthy of full-page engravings in the old herbals, the medical books of ancient and medieval times. Most of them are species of European or Asiatic origin; their histories can be traced back to a period when there were no books, word of their efficacy as remedies or charms spreading from place to place by wandering merchants and soldiers returning from foreign lands.

Plantain or pigweed (*Plantago major*), one of the commonest of weeds, has a long and colorful history. One of the first to mention it was Dioscorides, writing in the first century A.D. Dioscorides was a Greek physician who traveled widely and described many plants new for that time. He prescribed the leaves
of the plantain for the treatment of dogbite and recommended that the leaves be chewed to alleviate toothache.

Plantain was mentioned in the tenth century in a Saxon manuscript, the Leechbook of Bald, where, called by its Saxon name “waybroad,” it was described as one of the magic herbs which occupied a prominent place in Saxon herb lore.

In the late 1500's John Gerard, a barber-surgeon and well-known horticulturist, listed plantain in his Herball or General Historie of Plantes, stating, “the juice dropped in the eies cooles the heat and inflammation thereof.”

Plantain was so commonly used in the time of Shakespeare that it found its way into one of his plays:

Romeo: Your plantain leaf is excellent for that.
Benvoleo: For what, I pray thee?
Romeo: For your broken shin.

(Romeo and Juliet, Act I, Scene II)

Fifty years after the landing of the pilgrims John Josselyn, a British visitor to America, reported in his New England Rareties Discovered that the plantain, unknown in the Western Hemisphere before Europeans arrived, had already become common, and had been given a name by the Indians meaning “Englishman’s foot” or “white man’s foot,” because it became established wherever Englishmen set foot.

Longfellow used this common name for the plant in his poem Hiawatha, speaking of the English settlers:

Wheresoe’er they tread, beneath them
Springs a flower unknown among us,
Springs the white man’s foot in blossom.

Plantain was still being used medicinally in the nineteenth century. Plantain seeds, being mucilaginous, were used in pulmonary diseases, according to the Cyclopaedia or Universal Dictionary of Arts, Science, and Literature, of Abraham Rees, printed in 1819. As recently as 1899 the Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia listed a medical use for the plantain: “The leaf is bound upon inflamed surfaces with a soothing effect.”

Thus the plantain, which gardeners do their best to eradicate, comes down to us from the past, not only as a useful and respected plant, but also as quite a literary one.

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