

Are Dandelions Beneficial?.....by Dale Thomas

Dandelions are common members of the lettuce tribe of the sunflower family and are successful inhabitants of lawns, pastures, and roadsides. The morphology of a dandelion makes it a plant that is perfectly shaped to survive grazing by animals or mowing by lawn mowers. It has a large tap root and does not have an above ground stem except for the flower stalk. The typical mowing of it leaves the bud and root behind. Its windblown fruit (achenes--a one-seeded fruit) float around like parachutes spreading the plant widely.

The common dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale*, is a member of a genus with 8-12 species in North America, 60 species in the Northern Hemisphere, and two in the Southern Hemisphere. *T. officinale* is native to Greece and is now widespread throughout Europe and North America. *Taraxacum* is derived from an Arabic word and *officinale* means that it was found in stores where herbs or medicines were sold. Linnaeus called it *Leontodon*, which means lion's tooth, as does its most common English name (Dandelion). This genus of plants probably originated in the Himalayas. A Russian species is cultivated for rubber.

Dandelion has a long history of use for food. Its leaves are edible raw in salads when they are young. Its unopened flower buds can be used as capers or in stir fry and salad. The older leaves can be cooked, drained twice and eaten as a spinach-like

potherb or can be chilled and then used as a cold salad. Most recipes resemble those for poke salad and usually involve the use of crispy fried bacon, bacon grease, and boiled eggs. In places where basements are available, dandelions can be dug and brought inside and kept in the dark where they produce fresh non-green leaves that are very tender and not bitter. It has been recommended that one plant dandelions in pots with rollers so that they can be rolled inside into dark areas to blanch the leaves. Healthy outside plants can be blanched by covering them with an opaque pot or bucket.

The roots can be peeled and boiled and are especially good in the winter time. The roots are also dried and ground and used as a coffee substitute or to adulterate coffee in the manner that roasted chicory roots are used. The open flowers can be dipped in batter and fried and make excellent fritters that are good served with syrup, jellies and even with vinegar. Its flowers have been widely used to make dandelion wine.

Dandelion, especially its roots, has a long history of use in herbal medicine. Chinese physicians have prescribed dandelion for colds, bronchitis, pneumonia, hepatitis, boils, ulcers, obesity, dental problems, itching, and internal in-



Dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale*

juries. Indian Ayurvedic physicians have used it to treat breast cancer. The 10th century Arab physicians were first to use dandelions to increase urine production. The Doctrine of Signatures (idea that God created a sign in his plant creations to show what human or animal woe that that particular plant would cure) led to its being used to treat jaundice because of its yellow flowers and as a diuretic because of its milky sap. Dandelion root used to be a part of Lydia E. Pinkham's formula and was a part of the U.S. Pharmacopoeia from 1831 till 1926. Castleman (*The Healing Herbs*) gives the use of dandelion root for premenstrual syndrome, weight loss, high blood pressure, congestive heart failure, cancer prevention, yeast infection, and digestive aid. The FDA lists dandelion as a safe herb. It contains over three times more vitamin A than carrots and is high in potassium. Leung (*Chinese Herbal Remedies*) reports that fresh leaves can be used for sores, snake bites, and insect bites. He also recommends ground, dried dandelion root to be used as a tea for the treatment of ulcers.

The Oxford *Dictionary of Plant-Lore* (Vickery), says that the British youngsters were afraid to pick dandelion leaves because if they did, they would undoubtedly wet the bed. This concept, no doubt, was based on its diuretic powers but it was widespread enough to give it the Dutch name of pisse-bed and the French name of pissenlit. Its more mundane English names included wet-the-bed and pee-in-the-bed.

Fear of bedwetting did not keep English youngsters from picking seed heads and playing the name of "he loves me, he loves me not" based on short blows of the seeds. They considered the floating seeds to be fairies and if one caught a seed in flight he could make a wish and open his hand and free the fairy and it would grant his wish. They also thought they could tell time by which way the wind blew the seeds from the head. As a youngster in East Tennessee, we considered it good luck if we could blow all the seeds from a head in one breath. Vickery also reported the playing of a game of short blows of breath with this year, next year, or sometimes never to see when one would get married. He also reports the use of both dandelion leaf tea and root tea as a cure for almost anything. The fresh milky sap was used to remove warts.

Dandelions have been used as a food supplement to help "sickly" young turkeys and rabbits to recover by

various European growers. It has been reported to be sought out by sheep and especially lambs. One report gives the plant the credit for curing a whole group of sick lambs. I have personally observed a herd of deer eating only dandelion leaves although they were in a field of six-inch tall young wheat plants in Cades Cove in the Smokies.

Dandelions are cultivated in various parts of the world for food as well as for medicine. The Midwestern settlers brought in dandelion to help feed the European bees that they used to pollinate their orchards and crops. Bees prefer dandelion to a lot of fruit trees and so the flowers have to be mown to allow the bees to pollinate the trees. The flowers furnish food for the bees before and after the flowering times of the trees. I have never seen a better display of wildflowers than whole hillside fields covered with dandelion flowers, especially along the AlCan highway in Canada and Alaska.

If dandelion were to be common somewhere except in our monoculture lawns, it would have a wider acceptance as a beautiful wildflower. If you must remove dandelions from your lawn, it is best to use an asparagus fork or knife rather than spot herbicides. It would be a much better idea to eat it in early spring and leave it be. When did St. Augustine, Bermuda, Zoysia, Centipede, Carpet grass or any other monoculture lawn look as good as one with a profusion of flowers of dandelions, bluets, spring beauty, and speedwells? Throughout the ages, dandelions have been more friends than foes. *Dr. R. Dale Thomas is curator of the ULM Herbarium and professor of biology. He is vice-president of the LNPS.*

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