

THE DANDY DANDELION

DANDELION (*Taraxacum officinale*), also known as lion's tooth, blow-ball, cankerwort...

“a tap-rooted perennial from a basal rosette of leaves. Yellow flowers are produced on leafless stalks”.
(Source: **Weeds of the Northeast**, R. Uva, J. Neal and J. DiTomaso).

Otherwise known as the almost universal poster-child for the word “weed”...

And striking terror, fury and/or tears for gardeners and proud lawn-keepers everywhere.

The common dandelion is native to Europe but has spread pretty much worldwide via its wind-blown seeds, including all of Pennsylvania.

Its bright yellow flowers are among the earliest harbingers of Spring, popping up quite merrily in yards, meadows and fields, and parks across the state, and even in the cracks of sidewalks and roadways. This saucy little bloom is very self-confident, opportunistic and tough – she has staying power, needing only 2cm of soil in which to germinate her seeds, and her seeds can be produced without pollination, so she is also extremely independent!

While lawn enthusiasts everywhere may be quick to grab for the Round-Up to spray death these bright little marvels, or to reach for that funky pronged garden tool to dig them out by the roots, perhaps I may be suffered to ask...WAIT!?!?!

Consider also this:

This is one underestimated plant! Nearly all of the plant parts are edible at different stages of growth and can be (and are) utilized for their highly nutritious elements, including their detoxifying greens in salads and vegetable dishes. Their slightly bitter flavors add an intriguing contrast to the relative sweetness of these everyday dishes. (I admit to running out back with the kitchen shears to snip a small bunch pf fresh dandelion leaves to mix into my summer salads; that intense savory flavor makes me feel like quite the gourmet.)

Dandelion leaves are rich in vitamins A, C, and K and are good sources of calcium, potassium, iron and manganese. Those bright yellow flowers are rich in anti-oxidants, polyphenols and are naturally anti-inflammatory and anti-angiogenic (meaning they inhibit the growth of new blood vessels, important in combatting the growth of tumors in cancer patients). The dandelion has been used as an herbal remedy for thousands of years to treat inflammation, swollen lymph nodes, cysts and abscesses, and to detoxify the liver and kidneys, and as a diuretic.

Dandelion flower petals are added to other citrus ingredients to make dandelion wine, and the ground, roasted roots can be used to make a caffeine-free dandelion coffee.

Dandelion is one of the traditional ingredients in root beer. Add a good scoop of vanilla ice cream and you have a healthier root beer float than you might ever have imagined. And yum!

Perhaps most important to consider: Dandelion is an important food source for certain birds. Song-birds, such as black birds, gold finches, sparrows and towhees love dandelion seeds; and larger bird species including pheasants, wild turkeys, quail and Pennsylvania's state bird, the ruffed grouse, love dandelion seed heads.

The larvae of some butterflies and moths thrive on dandelion as a food plant. One of the earliest emerging butterflies of Spring, the pearl-bordered fritillary (*Boloria Euphrosyne*) sips dandelion nectar.

Perhaps most compelling is the fact that bees: bumblebees, solitary bees and honeybees, all visit dandelion as a food source, especially in the early Spring and in times of drought or whenever other food sources are not plentiful. While dandelions cannot fully sustain the bee's nutritional needs, they are vital when little food is available. The maligned "weed" gives bees a fighting chance in a time when bee populations are severely challenged. And, without healthy bees, we will have much less pollination and plant production – a topic for another article.

While dandelions are admittedly invasive and can infest a farmer's crops at will, they can be beneficial as well, even for farmers. Their strong taproot brings up nutrients in the soil for shallower-rooting plants, increasing mineral and nitrogen levels to the soil, and contributing to plants' stamina and growth. And, as mentioned, the dandelion attracts pollinating insects and releases ethylene gas which helps fruits to ripen.

Perhaps I sound slightly desperate to convince the reader of the lovely "weed"'s right to exist, let alone proliferate. If we define "weed" as any wild plant growing where it is not wanted and in competition with cultivated plants...well, we are left with a conundrum. I just know I have to respect this spritely blithe spirit of a wild plant, be gentle in removing it from my personal property where I just do not want it, and to embrace the belief she should be allowed some space in my world, and my garden.

Nod on, *Taraxacum officinale*! You have justified yourself to me!

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