



May 11, 2021

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DANDELION

Dandelion is just one of the common names for the early spring, jagged leaved, yellow flowering plant that children love, but is the bane of gardeners. Other names include: Lion's-tooth, Blowball, Cankerwort, Milk Witch, Piss-a-bed, Irish Daisy, Monk's head and Priest's-crown. There is no definitive source for the name Dandelion though it seems to be derived from the French *dent de lion* (lion's tooth). The name Piss-a-bed (*Pissenlit* in French) is clear as an over-eating of a young dandelion green salad may have that effect!

I have fond childhood memories of Dandelions, one of the first flowering plants of spring with the bright yellow blossoms that blanket meadows and lawns as a sign of warmer days ahead. Even the name 'Dandy lion' was fun to say, always bringing questions of why it was called a lion? I would pick fists of flowers and place them in a canning/ mason jar on the kitchen table. I recall my daughter, as a preschooler when we were walking passed a neighbor's lawn, pointing to it and saying, "Look! More Lions!" Dandelions were fast blooming; the flowers seemed to quickly form billowy 'puff-balls' that were enjoyed perhaps more than the flowers as they were picked and blown upon to watch the seeds separate into hundreds of gentle, lighter-than-air parachutes that were carried in all directions by the wind currents.



This childhood love affair with Dandelions turns 180 degrees for the adult – homeowner and gardener who look upon it as a nuisance of a weed – not 'wildflower,' that is battled with hoe, root lifter on hand and knees, and sprays. Dandelions seem to be able to grow anywhere, especially where they are not wanted. The root is indestructible, if a gardener leaves any part of the root, it will send up new green growth.

Botanically, Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) along with endives, chicories, and daisies, is part of the Compositae family. Unfortunately for the gardener, over one hundred different varieties have been identified . . . so far. And, all are equally tenacious and prolific!

Dandelion is not native to the United States. It is considered an invasive species that was brought here in seed form by early colonists – English, French and Dutch for its herbal and medicinal properties. It was probably one of the first fresh foods colonists ate after a winter of grains, dried and stored foods. All parts of the plant were and are used today – roots, leaves and flowers.

The **root**, used as a medicinal herb contains a starchy, bitter substance (taraxcin) that may help balance blood sugar and stimulate digestion. According to one source, the very presence of the bitter taste in the mouth promotes the flow of bile from liver and gallbladder.

Dandelion **leaves** are rich in minerals and vitamins, especially calcium and vitamins A, C, K, and B2. They are considered a very effective diuretic and as with roots, able to stimulate the digestion. The young greens (picked before flowering when not bitter tasting) can be used fresh in salads or sautéed with onions, mushrooms, and other greens, then flavored with balsamic vinegars. Finally, One could make a dandelion wine from the flowers and enjoy!!

