

Dandelion an uncelebrated hero in the plant world.

Nearly thirty million acres of our U.S. is covered in lawns and it has been estimated that 80 million pounds of pesticides are spread annually on them. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reports that homeowners use up to ten times more chemical pesticides per acre on their lawns than farmers. Every year Americans spend millions on lawn pesticides for a sea of uniform green of non-native grasses that use 30% of our country's precious water supply on them.

In contrast, until the 1800's people pulled grass out of their lawns to make room for dandelions and other useful "weeds" like chickweed, chamomile and mallow. And, in even earlier years the dandelion was planted and protected. Some might shudder as you read this but I have a designated raised bed to plant organic dandelion seeds, that yes, I purchased.

This uncelebrated hero the dandelion's name is from the French "dents de lion" or "teeth of the lion" and refers to the jagged-edged leaves. Its botanical name is *taraxacum officinale*. *Officinale*, means official and refers to its use as a bitter herb. The Latin word "officinale" means "sold in shops". An officinale plant was prized in the apothecary, which we know as today's pharmacy. Because the dandelion is considered a powerful diuretic, it was called such common names as 'piss-in-bed' and 'pissinlit'.

Both the leaves and roots have medicinal uses, but the root was officially included in the U.S. Pharmacopeia from 1831 to 1926. It remained in the National Formulary as a medicinal plant until 1965. Studies have shown that dandelions are rich in vitamin A, B, C and D, iron, manganese, magnesium, zinc and phosphorus. They have been used in traditional medical systems, including Native American traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurvedic medicine for hundreds and thousands of years.

Young, fresh dandelion leaves can be used as salad greens, in soups or on top of your pizza. The flowers are used to make wine or put the petals in homemade popsicles. The roasted roots are one of the ingredients in dandelion coffee. I confess, I delight in my morning cup of dandelion coffee with a bit of warm, homemade cashew milk. It's delicious and caffeine free. Of course, I first had to wean myself off of caffeine but now there's no going back.

Dandelions have many positive environmental qualities. They attract ladybugs providing them with nourishment. Happily, the lady bugs then in turn help to keep

your plant/garden aphids in check. Dandelions are one of the first foods of the spring for all types of bees. They provide nectar to butterflies, feed the caterpillars of endangered moths and birds will eat their seeds. Many forms of wildlife enjoy the dandelion as a tasty and healthy treat. The long taproots aerate your soil and take minerals up into the plants which are then returned to the ground when the dandelion dies.

I am still haunted by a friend who once said “you need to do something about those weeds in your yard” I looked at them and briefly questioned my organic practices. I look forward to seeing the dandelion flower who instinctively opens to greet the morning sun and closes in the evening to go to sleep. I revel in knowing it is the only flower that represents our 3 celestial bodies of the sun, moon and stars. The yellow flower being the sun, the puffball the moon and the dispersing seeds the stars. Finally, children love a dandelion flower and it is heartwarming to anyone who receives this token of love and joy when it is handed to you from precious hands of a child. Please consider the life-force they represent and don't spray your dandelions with toxic weed killers.

-Marais des Cygnes Extension Master Gardener Vickie Vetter-Scruggs