

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
Date: May 8, 2005
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Did you know that for less than \$3.00 you could purchase a packet of seeds to grow your very own crop of *Taraxacum officinale*, or in layman's terms – dandelion? But why the heck would you want to do that? It seems that we can sometimes spend an inordinate amount of our gardening time trying to get rid of them. Well, did you know that dandelions have not always been considered the evil weed that they are today? Their medicinal values were first referenced in 10th century medical journals of Arabian physicians. By the 16th century they were considered a valuable drug based on their diuretic effects. In ancient Chinese medicine it is known as *pu gong ying* and has been known for anti-bacterial properties of the juice of the flowers and is used as a tea for upper respiratory infections. It's name, *Taraxacum*, is believed to come from the Greek words *taraxos* meaning disorder and *akos* meaning remedy. Medicinally, it is said that dandelions can be useful as a diuretic, a laxative, a tonic, an antiseptic, for digestive disorders, arthritis, circulatory problems and healing of wounds.

Nutritionally, dandelions are one of the top ranking green vegetables. They contain huge amounts of vitamin A, ranking third in all food products, after cod-liver oil and beef liver. They are also rich in fiber, potassium, iron, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus and the B vitamins, thiamine and riboflavin. Additionally, dandelions are a good source of protein.

Other common names for *Taraxacum officinale* are swine's snout, yellow gowan, Irish daisy, puffball, peasant's cloak and lion's tooth, which in French is *dent de lion* and from which the word dandelion is derived. It is an herbaceous perennial with a long taproot, large toothed green leaves that can be 2-16 inches long, and yellow flower heads that open in daylight and close in the evening. These flower heads turn to seed heads which, on one plant, can consist of 15,000 seeds of which each can be dispersed like little parachutes carried off by the wind.

All parts of the plant are edible. The leaves, or greens, are best when small for that is when they are most tender and can be delicious in a fresh salad. In spring they are more bitter in taste than in the fall. Larger leaves can be sweetened and tenderized by blanching or steaming, or wilted with a hot dressing. The taproot can be roasted and ground for a coffee type drink. The flowers can be used to make wine, which is said to taste a bit like sherry, or used as a garnish and to add color to salads. The flowers can also be used to make yellow dye for wool, or the whole plant will dye magenta.

If you have decided you would like to cultivate this useful plant, purchased seeds may produce varieties with a milder flavor. But you can also collect your own seed. Plant the following spring in shallow holes about 12 inches apart in narrow raised beds. The soil should be loose, nitrogen rich and "lightened" with sawdust or fine wood chips. This makes those taproots easier to harvest.

If you haven't been convinced to nourish and treasure these valued plants and they are growing without any encouragement on your part, there are ways to remove them and to prevent them from taking over your yard. Their presence in your lawn may indicate the turf is thin and malnourished. To discourage them, overseed the lawn, fertilize properly, water when needed and keep it mowed. Pull out the dandelions when they are young, before the taproot gets deep and before the flowers go to seed. Once the taproot has developed, it must be completely removed because plants can sprout from even small pieces. Dandelion weeders are useful for this because they can go deep down into the soil and minimize soil disturbance leaving less ground open for more weeds to grow. In the garden, mulch to prevent seeds from germinating.

If all else fails, a systemic, post emergent herbicide containing 2,4-D or dicamba can be used. The entire label must be read carefully and all directions followed. Time of year, temperature, winddrift and weather conditions are all-important considerations for proper and safe use. For more information and specifics for use of these herbicides, pick up a copy of WSU Extension Bulletin EB0607, Lawn Weed Control For Washington State Homeowners, at the WSU Skagit County Extension Office.

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