

A Day for the Dandelion

Maybe they have earned a little respect after all of these years.

by Carol Barany for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

For most gardeners and homeowners, your least favorite holiday is just around the corner. On April 5, America observes National Dandelion Day.

I'm not making this up. Why shouldn't dandelions have their day?

Who doesn't remember the carefree joy of gathering dandelions (the only flower you couldn't get in trouble for picking) for bouquets and flower crowns?

Young children aren't the only ones who love dandelions. The golden ray flowers are one of the most important early spring nectar sources for over 100 species of insects, including a wide host of pollinators, and especially hungry bees. Wild birds feast on dandelion seeds, chickens and goats consider their leaves a delicacy, and hummingbirds use dandelion down to line their tiny nests.

I know. You still can't find any cause for celebration. Dandelions just might be America's most hated flower. Yet why do you have so many in your lawn?

Dandelions evolved 30 million years ago in Eurasia, and have been used by humans for food and as an herb for much of recorded history. Well known to ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, they were used in traditional Chinese medicine for over a thousand years.

While it seems like they are everywhere these days, the common dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) is not a North



Bees and other pollinators love the early blooming dandelion.
MINNESOTA STAR TRIBUNE PHOTO

American native. Beginning the mid-1600s, European settlers intentionally brought seeds to America. Far from hated, dandelions then were considered a desirable plant. Isn't it ironic that centuries ago, gardeners were trying to keep the weeds out of their prized dandelion patch?

In those early American gardens, dandelions were cultivated for food and medicine. It was a time when many illnesses were caused by nutritional deficiencies. Raw dandelion greens, containing high amounts of vitamins A, C, and K, and moderate sources of calcium, potassium, iron, and manganese, were therapeutic. Their English folk name "piss-a-bed" and the French "pissemil" refers to the strong diuretic effect of dandelion roots.

The puffballs we blew on to make a wish as children contain as many as 20,000 seeds capable of drifting hundreds of miles on the wind, thanks to plume-like structures on the seed that act like parachutes. It didn't take long to plant the North American continent. As any gardener can attest, dandelions can grow just about anywhere.

When a seed germinates, it produces a rosette of tiny leaves at soil level. Below can be a deep tap root, capable of growing 10 to 15 feet deep, although 6 to 18 inches deep is usual.

Dandelion roots produce 'suckers' which give rise to new plants. When the root of a dandelion is broken, as it may be if you try to yank it from the ground, each root fragment can produce a new plant. This explains why it seems you can never get rid of dandelions. They are perennials capable of overwintering, and there's always a new generation waiting to emerge.

On the positive side, these deep roots break up densely packed soils allowing more water and air flow, which is healthy for soil ecosystems.

We've all been reminded that "when the world gives you lemons, make some lemonade." When the world gives you dandelions, why not make some wine from dandelion flower petals? Roasted and ground, dandelion roots are a caffeine-free coffee alternative. The yellow flowers can be dried and ground into a yellow-pigmented powder and used as a dye.

Still not convinced that dandelions deserve a national holiday? Consider this.

Dandelions secrete latex when the tissues are cut or broken. In the wild type, the latex content is low and variable. Using modern cultivation methods and genetic engineering, scientists

have developed a cultivar that is suitable for commercial production of natural rubber which, as yet, has no artificial replacement. It well may be that the dandelion will become a cost-effective and eco-friendly alternative to the rubber tree. Increasing demand for rubber currently means that rainforests are being converted to agricultural lands.

Closer to home, dandelions will begin popping up as soon as temperatures reach 50 degrees. Ridding your lawn of dandelions without using herbicides is easier if you don't set your mower too low. Short turf allows more light for dandelion seeds to germinate and grow. Cutting back on fertilizers may also help. Dandelions and other weeds win the competition for fertilizers with turf grass every time. Encouraging plants like clovers to grow in the lawn provide natural sources of nitrogen.

Although non-native dandelions may be hard to control in your lawn and garden, they are listed as an invasive species only in Alaska and Oregon. Otherwise, dandelions are more of an aggravation than genuine thugs negatively impacting natural habitats by pushing out native species, and doing real damage to the ecosystem.

And that is something to celebrate.

