

DANDILIONS

Taraxacum officinale

Name

The common name for this perennial plant is recorded as far back as 16th century French literature. Four centuries ago it was called Dent de lion or Denta Leonis, (lion's teeth) referring to the toothed leaf shape. Dandelions are native to Europe and Asia, but have naturalized all over the world.

The Botanical name is derived from the Greek *taraxos* and *achos* which mean, disorder and remedy, a comment on the plants ability to spread and its medicinal properties.

History

In the 11 century Arabian physicians promoted its many medicinal uses, and it is used to this day. The French common name; pissenlit, reflects its medicinal property as a diuretic.

During WW II the Russian dandelion (T. kok-saghyz) was cropped for its latex (the white sap), which was extracted from the roots to produce rubber. T officinale produces a small quantity of latex.

Growth Habit

If this harbinger of spring were a rare plant we would nurture it but instead it is overwhelmingly abundant. It grows well in both, sun or shade, favouring deep humus-rich soils.

Dandelions display a great deal of variation. The crown grows just below or at the soil surface so it escapes harm from the mower blades. It produces a rosette of lobed leaves 7-15 cm (3-6") long cm long. In the lawn the leaves lie flat, choking out the grass but in a grassy field the leaves grow vertically and can grow to 30 cm (12") tall.

Dandelions bloom in late spring or early summer, though they can repeat bloom in the fall. The solitary yellow 'flower' head (a capitulum inflorescence) is 3.5-5 cm (1.5-2") in diameter and is supported by a hollow leafless stalk. The plant can produce a great abundance of seeds annually without fertilization or pollination (apomictic reproduction). The beautifully designed seeds have a parachute like pappus allowing it to sail in the wind, and spread rapidly.

The deep taproot is normally less than 30 cm (12") long and has brown epidermis covering white flesh. New plants regenerate when the taproot is cut even if more than ½ of the root is removed. Dandelions do not compete with grass for water or nutrients because the root uses the water and nutrients stored deeply in the soil. They are drought resistant and survive adverse soil conditions.

Benefits

The deep taproot improves the soil by bringing nutrients up from the deep soil; particularly Iron, Calcium, Sodium, Phosphate and Potassium. They improve drainage by breaking hardpans in the subsoil and leaving behind deep channels for water to seep into after the plant dies.

Earthworms like the soil near dandelions and tunnel through the channels left by the decaying roots.

Hover flies (the larvae are aphid predators) are attracted to the flowerhead, thereby reducing the aphid pest problem.

Dyes are made from dandelions; the flower produces a pale yellow dye and the root creates a deep yellow brown dye.

All parts of the plant are edible. Leaves are especially good for salads in the spring. They have a chicory-like taste and contain large amounts of vitamin A and C, Iron, Calcium, Sodium, Phosphate, Potassium, along with lesser amounts of vitamin B, riboflavin, flavoxanthin and many other beneficial substances. Leaves are also used to make beer and tonics. Dandelion roots are dried and ground up for use as coffee substitute and the flowerhead is used to make wine.

Weeding

Remove the whole root in spring before it blooms. There are many tools available; there is the asparagus picker, which pries the root up from the soil, pogo-like tools that pull up a plug of soil with the root inside it (they aerate the soil also), and the hydraulic wand, which loosens the root as the water jet is pushed down the length of the taproot.

Dandelion and bacon salad

225 gm (1/2 lb) of young leaves

100 gm (1/4 lb) bacon

1 clove of garlic crushed

1 slice white bread cubed

4TBSP olive or walnut oil

1TBSP white wine vinegar

salt and pepper

Wash the leaves and place in a bowl. Fry and dice the bacon. Make croutons by frying the bread and garlic until golden brown in a small amount of left over grease. Make the vinaigrette by mixing the remaining ingredients, add a little sugar if desired.

Written by; M A Jackson-Hughes