

THE DANDELION—WEED OR HERB?

By Karen DiTrapani

As more and more of us consider eating and buying locally grown food, I propose that we also look to what grows naturally in our surroundings. Many herbs have somehow developed a reputation as weeds—undesirable plant life in our gardens or lawns. Judging from the number of weed-killing products available, it appears we are waging a war on weeds, especially the dandelion. However, from my observations of my own yard, sidewalks and neighbors' yards, the dandelion is here to stay, and I'm thrilled.

Many people don't know that the common dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) is a health-giving, medicinal, and culinary herb. It is high in potassium and is recognized for its therapeutic qualities with regard to the digestive system, skin, liver and urinary tract, as well as its diuretic properties. All parts of the dandelion have healing and nutritious attributes. For a nice spring or summer side dish of greens, the leaves can be sautéed with garlic, red wine and olive oil. Dandelion root can be infused in cider vinegar to make a high mineral-content dressing to enrich your salads. Even the bright yellow flowers are edible and will brighten any salad. The leaves can be used all season long, but the roots are best dug in the early spring and fall.

The dandelion is tenacious in its ability to grow almost everywhere. This means hardly any work is required from you, the gardener. It needs full sun to partial shade, disturbed soil, and low to moderate water. It is at home in fields, roadsides, urban areas, and, of course, your own backyard. Dandelions should be dug where pesticides have not been used and where road run-off won't contaminate the plant or soil.

As with any wild plant foraging, always be sure you identify the correct plant; a useful method is to learn to recognize the flower. Take a look at a photo in a guidebook or online and compare it to the real thing. If you do not recognize it, do not eat it! If you have trouble making a positive identification, many local nurseries will assist with plant identification.

This wonderful "weed" offers us the use of all its parts for our health and culinary delights. So, at the end of the season, when you see that pretty seed ball, blow on it, and help spread the good health weed! ☺



Dandelion Vinegar:

- Place five or six dandelion roots in a quart size Mason jar.
- Fill a Mason jar with apple cider vinegar and let stand in a cool, dark place for two weeks; strain into a clean jar or bottle.
- Use with your favorite oil to flavor your vegetables and salads.

The sources listed below will assist with plant identification, cultivation, and medicinal uses.

A Field Guide to Medicinal Plants and Herbs Of Eastern and Central North America

By Steven Foster and James A. Duke
Published by Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000

Growing 101 Herbs That Heal

By Tammi Hartung
Published by Storey Publishing, LLC, 2000

The Complete German Commission E. Monographs: Therapeutic Guide to Herbal Medicines

By Mark Blumenthal, Integrative Medicine Communications, Werner R. Busse, German Federal Institute for Drugs and Medical Devices, Bundesinstitut für Arzneimittel und Medizinprodukte (Germany), American Botanical Council
Published by Thieme, 1998


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