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The Intriguing World of Weeds — Common Dandelion — The Lion's Tooth

L. W. Mitich, Weed Technology
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From ancient times to the present, common dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale* Weber in Wiggers) has been considered one of the most delectable of garden vegetables. People have carried the seeds from place to place for cultivation since before written history. No early records exist of the importation of dandelion into the United States. This has been suggested as evidence that its use was so prevalent in Puritan times, that dandelion seed, along with seed of other essential plants, was carried to the Colonies as a part of every good wife's garden supply. More than most "weeds", therefore, dandelion has been spread by deliberate cultivation as a food.

Dandelion is a rarity in that humans can eat all parts. The young leaves are boiled like spinach or eaten raw in salads. The roots also are peeled and sliced for salads, or are eaten roasted or fried. The yellow blossoms can be eaten outright, deep fried or mixed into pancakes, or made into wine. Dandelion leaves can be made into a healthful tea, and the roots can be dried and ground, like chicory, for a coffee-like drink.

Dandelion is an exceptional source of iron, copper, potassium, and other minerals. It contains 0.5% phosphorus, 1.6% calcium and 0.5% magnesium. It is also a good source of vitamins A and C. Improved large-leaved dandelion varieties are available specifically for cultivation as an annual fall and spring vegetable.

Dandelion is considered a serious weed problem in Austria, Italy, Poland and Turkey. It is a principle weed in eight countries, including the United States; a common weed in 21 countries; and is present in most other nations. There are 50 to 60 species of *Taraxacum* and hundreds of variations have from time to time been described.

Dandelion is a stemless perennial herb with a long taproot and milky sap (latex). It forms a rosette of somewhat succulent, deeply and irregularly lobed leaves, 5 to 25 centimeters (2 to 10 inches) long. Flower heads are yellow, 2.5 to 5 centimeters (1 to 2 inches) across, atop hollow stalks. Mature fruit form pappi with many soft white hairs that comprise the familiar globose "puffballs" which children often disperse and which are borne efficiently by wind and water.

Dandelion can reproduce vegetatively if the taproot is broken into pieces. Thus, the whole taproot must be removed from the ground if the plant is to be eradicated physically. This can be difficult, as the taproot is contractile — it "locks in" to the soil and contracts as the rosette grows, keeping the growing point near the soil surface.

Turf for Peace

"Today, the more civilized and peaceful a country is, the more (formal) turf is used. When our lives become more comfortable, the importance of grass increases as a place where we can get close to it, enjoy it, play and relax on it. Turf is now a symbol of civilization, peace and affluence."

Dr. Fumio Kitamura
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