



# DANDELIONS

By Monroe S. Miller

*“Simple and fresh and fair from  
winter’s close emerging,  
As if no artifice of fashion, business,  
politics had ever been,  
Forth from its sunny nook of sheltered  
grass—innocent, golden, calm as  
the dawn,  
The spring’s first dandelion shows its  
trustful face.”*

—WALT WHITMAN

Walt Whitman obviously wasn’t a golf course superintendent. He couldn’t have been, not if he penned the lines above, which he called “The First Dandelion”.

I’ve always felt a certain kinship with Mr. Whitman; after all, he wrote the epic “Leaves of Grass”. That piece should be required reading!

There’s a contradiction here that Walt himself probably wasn’t aware of. Maybe that’s because he died in 1892, just about the time golf was getting revved up in America. It’s likely he didn’t play the game, and therefore never confronted a rough area loaded with dandelions gone to seed. The seedhead looks a lot like . . . a golf ball! Imagine that.

It’s pretty hard to manage a golf course and see any virtues in the dandelion. There is the seedhead problem of above. They are as prolific as nearly any other broadleaf weed we have to deal with; it is tough for a player to get a good lie in an area heavily infested with dandelions.

Once those seedheads have matured and the seeds are released, they are great travellers. And they aren’t very fussy about where they land. Dandelion seeds can germinate just about anywhere. They grow and prosper in places where practically nothing else will. We all know that from personal experience.

For those of us who prefer not seeing dandelions in our acres of grass, they present a tough battle and sometimes are nearly impossible to conquer. You cannot pull them out. They are anchored by an incredibly long central tap root that sometimes is as big as a healthy carrot. If you break the plant from the root, the root merely sends up a new plant.

You could, of course, dig them out. But some years, when the dandelion crop is good (or would that be bad?), it would be easier to hook up to a 3-16” bottom plow and turn the entire course over.

So we are pretty much left with herbicide control methods. They do a slick job in selectively taking dandelions out of a grass stand. It’s almost like magic.

There are problems with that, too. Two years ago my lectures about caution around trees—they are broadleaf plants just as surely as dandelions are—were taken to the nth degree. Last spring, when the dandelions reached their full bloom, it looked like someone had taken a giant-sized brush and painted bright gold around the base of every single tree on the golf course! It was awful; we spent a good bit of time cleaning that problem up.

The dandelion is usually the first flower to blossom in the spring, preceding even tulips and daffodils. They are also the last to flower during the growing season. I have, in fact, seen dandelion flowers in December on our golf course. No other “flower” in Wisconsin can claim anything close to that for a flowering period.

Some consider such extended flowering a virtue of the dandelion. For us, it is just one more reason why they’re such difficult competition. They are producing seeds for up to ten months out of a year.

Dandelions are kind of interesting though, from an academic view at least. They are members of the Composite family, which makes them relatives of daisies and sunflowers, goldenrods and asters. And of the burdock, which is a truly ugly weed. Composite describes the flowerheads, which are composed of many tiny individual flowers. When you snap off a dandelion blossom, you’re actually picking around 300 dandelion flowers (or florets). A single dandelion can produce many flowerheads at once—someone counted sixteen of them on one plant.

The leaves, which we’ve all seen growing in a circular pattern close to the ground, are the only plant part you see during the first year of a dandelion’s life. They are photosynthesizing all that first year to store carbohydrates for the next year and beyond. This is the time the dandelion is growing that huge taproot.

I know it’s tough if you are a golf course superintendent, but I’d like to suggest a bit of objectivity and ask you to consider the question: Is there, in fact, any virtue in the dandelion?

My answer is “yes”. Start with its intriguing name and the derivation of it. The French “Dent de Lion” is the source and it means “tooth of a lion”.

What other golf course weed offers as much to the palate as the dandelion? Many people use dandelion leaves in salads. They are iron-rich and have the spicy bite of chicory. One pound of dandelion leaves (raw) has 64,500 units of vitamin A, 50 percent more than a pound of carrots!

If you’d like, you can steam dandelion leaves and serve them just like you would spinach or kale.

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*“I know that spring is here when the new grass is pinned to the hillside  
with yellow pegs of dandelions.”*

—Arley Clark

Nearly every amateur winemaker has, at one time or another, aged a batch of heady dandelion wine. Can that be said of plantain or knotweed?

It's tough to argue that the flower-heads aren't beautiful, simply because they are. It's the color—there's no brighter golden yellow. It's the shape—look at one under a hand lens. And when they turn into seed spheres, perfectly round and white, they are individually as delicate as a snowflake.

Maybe another reason it's difficult to conjure up enormous dislike of the dandelion is because they're so much a part of the outdoor life of children.

How many of you remember your mother holding a dandelion under your chin, seeing a reflection and telling you that "you like butter"?

How many times have your own children presented you with a beautiful albeit wilted bouquet of dandelion flowers?

Wasn't it even you who taught your kids to split the top end of the stem with a fingernail and watch it roll up into a curl? Or to cautiously pick a seedhead, hold it to their lips, blow gently and watch the tiny seeds drift around on their parachutes? How about the tale some children believe about blowing

off the down to see what time it is?

Did you ever hear anyone shout, "don't pick those dandelion flowers" to a child? Of course not. No wonder little kids like dandelions!

Could you actually say you don't enjoy this child's verse:

*Dandelion,  
You'd make a dandy lion  
With your fuzzy yellow ruff.  
But when you're old  
You're not so bold  
You're gone with just one puff!*

Any plantsman, which includes all golf course superintendents, has to respect a plant that seemingly grows, voluntarily, almost anywhere—from sidewalk and street cracks to sand bunkers and forest floors.

One year quite a while ago, when my daughter Christie was three or four years old, she was helping me plant our garden. She heard all the lectures about straight rows, proper planting depth and correct spacing.

She reached into the lawn at the garden edge and plucked a dandelion blossom, asking, "did you plant this flower, Dad?"

"No," I replied. "They grow like that all by themselves. Pretty neat, huh?"

She agreed. It really is.

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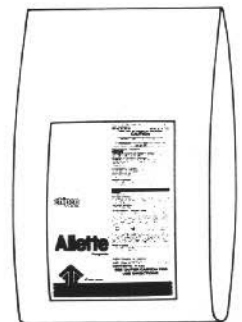
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