

## In Praise of the Dandelion

By Jim Bliss

Even though my mom used to have a specific tool just for digging up dandelions, I love those early spring bright spots of golden yellow. Dandelions are a wonderful attractor for pollinators. They are one of the first flowers to bloom in the spring so they provide a real boost for bees and then just keep blooming all summer long.

Even though dandelions are wide spread and amazingly successful, they are not native to the Americas. The earliest dandelions may well have come to the U.S. in the hold of the Mayflower. At that time, it was widely grown in Europe for its herbal and nutritional value. Every portion of this plant is edible and packed with vitamins. From valued herb to despicable weed, how the mighty have fallen!

If the medicinal and food value are not enough, there is even more to love about dandelions, even for lawn enthusiasts. Dandelions proliferate in conditions that are difficult for other plants. A lawn that is filled with dandelions is most often a lawn in trouble. Dandelions prefer bare spots that allow them to spread their toothed leaves along the ground with no competition. Incidentally, it is this leaf that gives the dandelion its name from the French *dent de lion* or tooth of the lion. They also are able to penetrate packed soils with a prodigious tap root that can penetrate over 9 feet, although 2 feet is more likely. Think about it. Would you rather pay to have your lawn aerated or just enjoy the dandelions? For me it's a no brainer. The other advantage to this deep-rooted plant is that it acts like a mineral pump bringing up nutrients, especially calcium, from deep underground to the surface where they are often in short supply.

Most people, when they "dig" out dandelions, are just fooling themselves. With that deep tap root, dandelions bud from where they are cut producing two or more plants where you only had one. That's one way to propagate them, but I'm not sure that's the intent. Many pesticides also have this propagating effect. If grasses and other plants are close together, dandelions have trouble rooting. If you let them grow, they will revitalize the soil with deep minerals and aerate at the same time.

There is a lot of truth to the common wisdom that a lawn with dandelions is a lawn in trouble. The dandelions are not the problem, however; they are part of nature's solution.

If I haven't convinced you of the wonder of dandelions by now, just imagine yourself stretched out in a lawn chair on a warm summer evening sipping a chilled glass of dandelion wine to the soft chorus of crickets and tree frogs...need I say more?

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