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## COMMON DANDELION (*Taraxacum officinale*)



From [\*Identifying and Harvesting Edible and Medicinal Plants in Wild \(and Not So Wild\) Places\*](#)

Pen and ink/watercolor pencil illustrations and photos by "Wildman"  
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The dandelion is a perennial, herbaceous plant with long, lance-shaped leaves. They're so deeply toothed, they gave the plant its name in Old French: Dent-de-lion means lion's tooth in Old French.

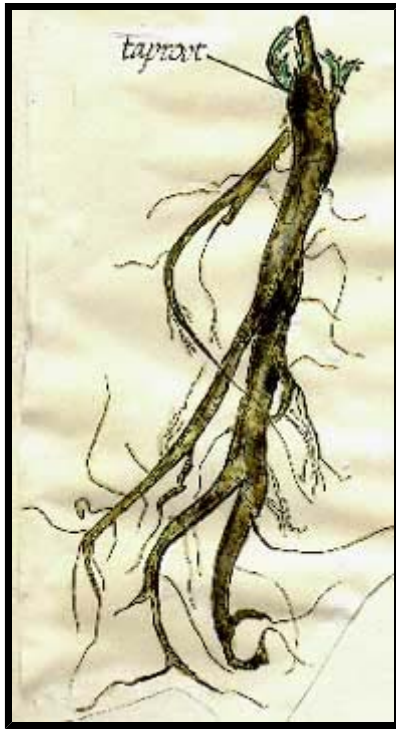
The leaves are 3 to 12" long, and 1/2 to 2-1/2" wide, always growing in a basal rosette.



**Composite Flower**



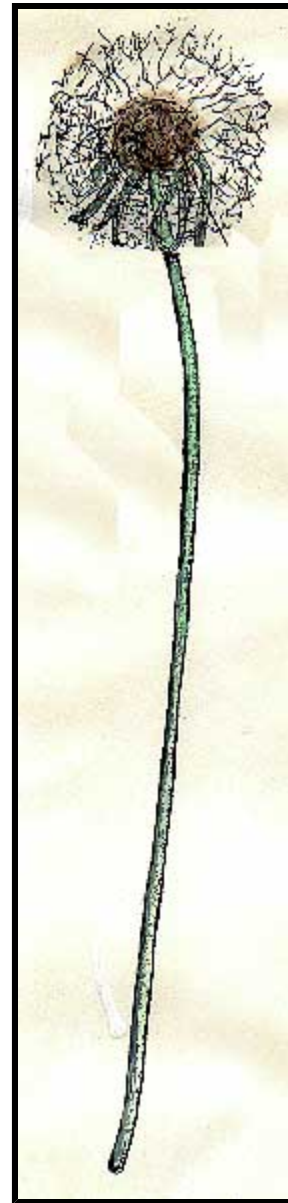
**Dandelion Leaf**



**Beige Taproot**



**Parachute and Seed**



**Seed Head**

The rosette is immature, tightly wrapped leaf bases just above the top of the root form a tight "crown."

Dandelion leaves are at their best when they've just emerged.




The dandelion's well-known yellow, composite flowers are 1 to 2" wide.

#### **Basal Rosette**

They grow individually on hollow flower stalks 2 to 18" tall. Each flower head consists of hundreds of tiny ray flowers. Unlike other composites, there are no disk flowers.



Reflexed bracts grow under each flower.	<b>Yellow Composite Flower</b>
<p>The flower head can change into the familiar, white, globular seed head overnight. Each seed has a tiny parachute, to spread far and wide in the wind.</p> <p>The thick, brittle, beige, branching taproot grows up to 10" long. All parts of this plant exude a white milky sap when broken.</p>	
	<b>Dandelion Seed Head</b>

There are no poisonous look-alikes. Other very similar *Taraxacum* species, as well as [chicory](#) and wild lettuce only resemble dandelions in the early spring. All these edibles also exude a white milky sap when injured, but [chicory](#) and wild lettuce leaves have some hair, at least on the underside of the midrib, while *Taraxacum* leaves are bald. Unlike the other genera, *Taraxacum* stays in a basal rosette. It never grows a tall, central, stalk bearing flowers and leaves.

Dandelions are especially well-adapted to a modern world of "disturbed habitats," such as lawns and sunny, open places. They were even introduced into the Midwest from Europe to provide food for the imported honeybees in early spring. They now grow virtually worldwide. Dandelions spread further, are more difficult to exterminate, and grow under more adverse circumstances than most competitors.

Most gardeners detest them, but the more you try to weed them up, the faster they grow.

The taproot is deep, twisted, and brittle.

Unless you remove it completely, it will regenerate. If you break off more pieces than you unearth, the dandelion wins. "What's a dandelion digger for?" a dandelion asked.

"It's a human invention to help us reproduce," another dandelion replied.

Collect dandelion leaves in early spring, when they're the tastiest, before the flowers appear. Harvest again in late fall. After a frost, their protective bitterness disappears. Dandelions growing in rich, moist soil, with the broadest leaves and largest roots, are the best. Select the youngest individuals, and avoid all plants with flowers. Some people eat the greens from spring to fall, when they're very bitter. Others boil out the summer bitterness (and water-soluble vitamins) out in two changes of water. It's all a matter of preference.

Dandelion greens are wonderful in salads, sautéed or steamed. They taste like chicory and endive, with an intense heartiness overlying a bitter tinge.

People today shun bitter flavorsóthey're so conditioned by overly sweet or salty processed food. But in earlier times, we distinguished between good and bad bitterness. Mixed with other flavors, as in a salad, dandelions improve the flavor.

I also love sautéing them for about 20 minutes with onions and garlic in olive oil, adding a little home-made wine before they're done. If you're not used to the slight bitterness, cook them with sweet vegetables, especially sliced carrots and parsnips. Boiling dandelions in one or more changes of water makes them milderóa good introduction if you're new to natural foods. Early spring is also the time for the crownógreat sautéed, pickled, or in cooked vegetable dishes.

You can also eat dandelion flowers, or use them to make wine. Collect them in a sunny meadow, just before mid-spring, when the most flowers bloom. Some continue to flower right into the fall. Use only the flower's yellow parts. The green sepals at the flower's base are bitter.

The flowers add color, texture, and an unusual bittersweet flavor to salads. You can also sauté them, dip them in batter and fry them into fritters, or steam them with other vegetables. They have a meaty texture that contrasts with other lighter vegetables in a stir-fry dish or a casserole. A Japanese friend makes exceptionally delicious traditional dandelion flower pickles, using vinegar and spices.

The taproot is edible all year, but is best from late fall to early spring. Use it as a cooked vegetable, especially in soups. Although not as tasty as many other wild root vegetables, It's not bad. I remember finding large dandelions with huge roots growing on the bottom of a grassy hillside. They were only mildly bitter,

so I threw them into a potato stock. With the added scallions, tofu, ginger, carrots and miso, this became an excellent Japanese miso soup.

Pre-boiling and changing the water, or long, slow simmering mellows this root. Sweet vegetables best complement dandelion roots. Sauteing the roots in olive oil also improves them, creating a robust flavor. A little Tamari soy sauce and onions complete this unusual vegetable side dish.

The leaves are more nutritious than anything you can buy. They're higher in beta-carotene than carrots. The iron and calcium content is phenomenal, greater than spinach. You also get vitamins B-1, B-2, B-5, B-6, B-12, C, E, P, and D, biotin, inositol, potassium, phosphorus, magnesium, and zinc by using a tasty, free vegetable that grows on virtually every lawn. The root contains the sugar inulin, plus many medicinal substances.

Dandelion root is one of the safest and most popular herbal remedies. The specific name, officinale, means that it's used medicinally. The decoction is a traditional tonic. It's supposed to strengthen the entire body, especially the liver and gallbladder, where it promotes the flow of bile, reduces inflammation of the bile duct, and helps get rid of gall stones. This is due to its taraxacin. It's good for chronic hepatitis, it reduces liver swelling and jaundice, and it helps indigestion caused by insufficient bile. Don't use it with irritable stomach or bowel, or if you have an acute inflammation.

The modern French name for this plant is pissenlit (lit means bed) because the root and leaf tea act on the kidneys as a gentle diuretic, improving the way they cleanse the blood and recycle nutrients. Unlike pharmaceutical diuretics, this doesn't leach potassium, a vital mineral, from the body. Improved general health and clear skin result from improved kidney function. One man I spoke to even claims he avoided surgery for urinary stones by using dandelion root tea alone.

Dandelions are also good for the bladder, spleen, pancreas, stomach and intestines. It's recommended for stressed-out, internally sluggish, and sedentary people. Anyone who's a victim of excessive fat, white flour, and concentrated sweeteners could benefit from a daily cup of dandelion tea.






Dandelion root's inulin is a sugar that doesn't elicit the rapid production of insulin, as refined sugars do. It helps mature-onset diabetes, and I used it as part of a holistic regime for hypoglycemia (low blood sugar).

Dandelion leaf infusion also good at dinner time. Its bitter elements encourage the production of proper levels of hydrochloric acid and digestive enzymes. All the digestive glands and organs respond to this herb's stimulation. Even after the plant gets bitter, a strong infusion, is rich in vitamins and minerals, and helps people who are run-down. Even at its most bitter (*Taraxacum* come from

Arabic and Persian, meaning "bitter herb"), it never becomes intolerably so, like golden seal and gentian.

The leaf's white, milky sap removes warts, moles, pimples, calluses, and sores, and soothes bee stings and blisters.

Unlike most other seeds, dandelions can germinate without long periods of dormancy. To further increase reproductive efficiency, the plant has given up sex: The seeds can develop without cross-fertilization, so a flower can fertilize itself. This lets it foil the gardener by dispersing seeds as early as the day after the flower opens.

<p>A funny thing happened to me when I was collecting dandelions one day in Central Park. Two tour participants were <a href="#">undercover city Park Rangers</a> attending the tour!</p>	
<p>They had used marked bills, surveillance cameras, and walkie-talkies to <a href="#">infiltrate the group</a>. When I <a href="#">ate a dandelion</a>, the entire Parks Enforcement Patrol <a href="#">converged on my group</a>, and I was handcuffed and <a href="#">arrested</a> for removing vegetation from the park.</p>	
<p>But after I was fingerprinted, they couldn't hold me. I had eaten all the evidence. Their scheme had backfired!</p> <p>I called every newspaper, TV station, and wire service. The next day, when I went to get the paper, five cops stopped me. They wanted my autograph. I was on page one of the <a href="#">Chicago Sun-Times</a>, and in newspapers and on the radio around the country.</p>	
<p>Reuters broadcast the story around the world. <a href="#">WCBS Evening News</a> with Dan Rather covered the story, national and local talk show appearances followed.</p>	
<p>When I had to <a href="#">appear in court</a>, I served passersby and reporters "Wildman's Five-Boro Salad," complete with dandelions, on the steps of the Manhattan Criminal Court,</p>	

and the press ate it up once more.

Two weeks later, the city dropped the charges, and [hired me](#) as a naturalist, to lead [tours](#) teaching people to eat dandelions and other wild foods.



I worked for the New York City Parks Department for four years, leaving and resuming free-lance activities after a [new anti-environmental administration](#) took office.





[Dandelion Recipes](#)

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