

Native Wild Foods

The Ubiquitous Dandelion

Taraxacum officinale

by Dick Deuerling and Peggy Lantz

A description of the ubiquitous dandelion is hardly necessary. Whether plant lovers or not, everyone recognizes this common weed with the basal rosette of long, deeply toothed leaves, the head of yellow florets, and the fluffy white ball of seeds. The name dandelion means "the teeth of the lion", but it's hard to decide if it's the golden "teeth" in the flowers, or the "teeth" on the leaves.

For ages, the dandelion has been known for its medicinal properties all over the Old World and the Orient. Even the generic and specific name, *Taraxacum officinale*, translates into "official remedy for illnesses".

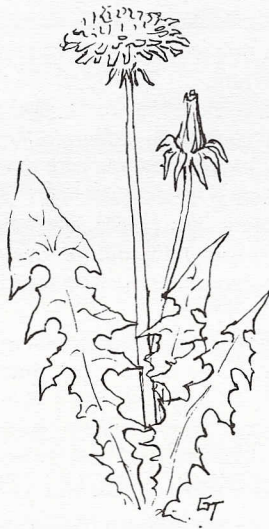
I realize that the dandelion is not a native species, but it is naturalized almost all over the USA. Its range extends into Florida better than half way down the peninsula, and it is becoming more and more prevalent in central Florida. When I moved to Orlando 32 years ago, it was hard to find. But now I think sod coming in from just a little farther up the state is bringing it in and making it easier to find.

The dandelion is another one of the completely useful wild edibles. I like the ones that can be used totally. The only part of the dandelion that is not edible is the hollow flower stem.

The best known part of the plant is the high-vitamin greens. When they are young and tender they can be used for salad greens. If they get a little bitter as they age, mix them with other salad greens. Some authors say that the fresh greens should be covered with boiling water, then rinsed to remove some of the bitter taste, and chilled before using as a salad. Others say the bitter taste is desirable. Cold weather sweetens the leaves.

When they become too bitter to eat raw, you can boil them in one or more changes of water. Add butter or bacon grease and enjoy as a cooked vegetable. In France they eat cooked dandelion greens between slices of buttered bread.

Another good way to prepare them is to finely chop a half cup of fresh tender leaves and mix them into a half pint of sour cream for a dip. Fresh

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)

chopped leaves can also be added to pancake or fritter batter.

Next, let's take into consideration the crown of the dandelion. This is the part of the plant that is light colored, just above the tap root from which emerge the leaves and flowers. This can be cut from the root, washed, stripped of the leaves and flower buds (for use later), and boiled for only a couple of minutes. Then saute in butter and serve with your favorite dressing.

The young roots of dandelion can be scrubbed and boiled for about 20 minutes in salted water, then sliced and served with butter and a dash of hot sauce. The roots can also be roasted in a 250° oven until crackly-dry and golden brown all the way through. Grind and use for a coffee substitute or extender. You may also add some roasted and ground persimmon seeds for an interesting drink. Ground roasted chickory root can also be added. Dandelion roots can be dug and used at any time of the year.

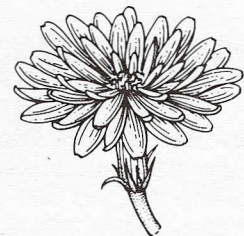
Now let's see what we can do to prepare the buds for eating. Like the crown from which they emerge, the buds have to be cooked only a couple of minutes, drained, and served with butter and a dash of lemon. The buds are also very tasty when pickled.

drawing by Gretchen Talmage, from *Roadside Rambles*, by Marie Mellinger

As always, collect your wild foods in safe places, not along roads where pesticides may have been sprayed, or automobile exhaust poisons have collected. Be safe, not sorry.

The flowers can be dipped in a batter of flour, beaten egg, milk, salt, and pepper, then fried, and dipped in salt to serve as an appetizer (recipe by Marie Mellinger). Care must be taken to remove all the stem parts from the flowers in any of their uses because they are bitter, bitter, bitter! The blossoms are also used to make wine, and there are a great number of recipes for wine-making. But my good friend, Gail Beck, from just outside of Dillard, Georgia, has a recipe for a dandelion soft drink (non-alcoholic) that is fantastic (Dick promises to get this recipe to you later).

Besides the "real" dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), there are a couple more dandelion types – some that you're more likely to find throughout Florida – that can be used for salads and cooked greens when gathered at

False dandelion
(*Pyrhopappus carolinianus*)

a very young stage of growth. They are false dandelion (*Pyrhopappus carolinianus*) and hawk's beard (*Youngia japonica* syn. *Crepis japonica*). I first found the common name of hawk's beard in Walter Taylor's new book, *Guide to Florida Wildflowers* (to order, see Subtropical Trader). You must be able to recognize these plants before the flower stalks appear. Once in flower they are much too bitter.

As far as nutrition goes, dandelions are better than any of our garden vegetables (which are bred for easy harvest, beautiful color and appearance, resistance to disease, and to mature all at the same time, etc). The whole dandelion plant contains an impressive list of vitamins and minerals, especially the leaves.

This is another of the weeds you can find in your yard, and if you don't like it growing in your lawn, eat it!

from *Flowering Plants of Florida*, © Wendy B. Zomlefer, 1989