

Taraxacum officinale

[Synonyms : *Leontodon dens-leonis*, *Leontodon officinalis*, *Leontodon taraxacum*, *Leontodon vulgaris*, *Taraxacum dens-leonis*, *Taraxacum leontodon*, *Taraxacum retroflexum*, *Taraxacum taraxacum*]

COMMON DANDELION is an invasive perennial. Native to Asia and Europe it has bright golden yellow flower heads.

It is also known as *Achicoria* (Spanish), *Amargón* (Spanish), *Baran* (Indian), Bitter aks, Bitterwort, Blowball, Bum-pipe, Burning fire, Canker, Canker weed, Cankerwort, *Chiang-nou-ts'ao* (Chinese), *Chicorée sauvage* (French), Clock, Clock flower, Clocks and watches, Combs and hairpins, Conquer more, Crow parsnip, Dandelion, *Dant y Llew* (Welsh), *Dant y Llew Cyffredin* (Welsh), Dashaloga, *Dent-de-lion* (French), *Dente de leão* (Portuguese), *Dente di lieone* (Italian), Devil's milk-pail, Devil's milk plant, *Diente-de-león* (Spanish), Dindle, Dog-posy, Doon-head-clock, *Dudhal* (Indian), Dumbledore, Faceclock, Fairy clock, *Fandens Mælkebøtte* (Danish), Farmer's clocks, Fortune teller, Four o'clock, Golden suns, Gowans, Grunsel, Hawkbit, Hawkweed, Heart-fever grass, Horse gowan, *Husí kap* (Czech), Irish daisy, *Kara hindiba otu* (Turkish), *Kanphul* (Punjabi), *Kuhblume* (German), Lay-a-bed, Lion's teeth, Lion's tooth, *Löwenzahn* (German), *Lucerny* (Czech), Male, *Maskros* (Swedish), Mess-a-bed, Milk gowan, *Mléčný lupen* (Czech), *Mlíčí* (Czech), Monk's head, Old man's clock, One o'clocks, One-two-three-pee-a-bed, *Paardebloem* (Dutch), *Pampeliška lékařská* (Czech), Peasant's clock, Pee in the bed, *Perdeblom* (Afrikaans), *Pfaffenröhrlin* (German), *Pis en lit* (French), Piss-a-bed, *Pissenliet* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Pissenlit* (French), Pissimire, Pittle bed, *Pleška* (Czech), *Pllat laiträon* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), Priest's crown, Puffball, *Pustebblume* (German), *Radicchiallar* (Italian), Schoolboy's clock, Shepherd's clock, Shit-a-bed, *Smetanka* (Czech), *Soffione* (Italian), Stink Davie, Swine snort, Swine's snout, *Tarassaco* (Italian), *Taráxaco* (Portuguese), *Tarkhash kun* (Arabic), Tell time, Time flower, Time teller, *Tohetake* (Maori), Twelve o'clock, *Voikukka* (Finnish), Wet-a-bed, Wet-weed, What o'clock, White endive, White wild endive, Wild endive, Wishes, Witch gowan, *Yabani aci marul* (Turkish), and Yellow gowan; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of bitterness, coquetry, danger is near, depart, grief, love's oracle, and rustic oracle.

The flowers only open in good sunshine.

Warning – handling the plant can cause dermatitis. The flowers can cause an allergic reaction in some people.

Officinale means 'of the shop (usually the apothecary's or herbalist's)'. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

The name Dandelion is a corruption of the French *Dent-de-lion* via Middle English *Dent de lyoun*. For some authorities the irregularly toothed leaves were thought to mirror the representations in early medieval woodcuts that depicted the teeth in a lion's jaw. This association (that some authorities also relate to the yellow flower and the golden teeth in the heraldic lion, and yet others to the whiteness of the root) runs through a large number of the European names. One of the old beliefs was that even to smell a common

dandelion could cause bedwetting thus accounting for common names such as Pee in the bed.

Both ancient Greek and Roman records show relatively few references to common dandelion and it is thought that it was the Arabs in the 10th or 11th Centuries who encouraged respect for its medicinal and culinary qualities in Europe. There are many, many different species of dandelion found on all the Continents and at least 36 of them are native to Britain alone. Although a large number of micro-species have been identified worldwide some authorities claim that their most exciting future finds in this genus are likely to be in China, Mongolia and Siberia where apparently so many have yet to be discovered.

The common dandelion has attracted its own share of lore. Even today some believe that blowing the feathered seeds off the puffball will carry their thoughts to their loved-one – although a gentle warning might be appropriate as to dream of the common dandelion is believed to be unlucky. The seed head provided an indicator for the depth of a lover's feelings. If a few seeds dispersed with one puff this indicated unfaithfulness, many seeds suggested indifference, but the whole head augured strong passion. Alternatively with each puff the words 'He loves me' and on the next puff 'He loves me not' were recited until the head was blown away. The number of puffs required to disperse that head could not only indicate the number of years before marriage but also the time (each puff representing an hour). Even in North America common dandelion attracted superstition as the Iroquois Indians believed it had the power to counter witchcraft.

For some the common dandelion is an emblem of the sun.

In Christian tradition the plant's bitter taste has made it a symbol of Christ's Passion.

When one thinks about it it is only because so many of us are taught to discount the dandelion as a 'weed' that its beauty is so often overlooked – but some of the references to it in literature make up for this. Two Americans born within five or six years of each other express the joy of the golden flowers in different ways. The elder, Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887) was a Congregationalist clergyman and writer and described the flower thus.

You cannot forget if you would those golden kisses all over the
cheeks of the meadow; queerly called dandelions.

His peer in this instance is the poet, essayist and diplomat, James Russell Lowell (1819-1891) and in one of his poems he wrote

Dear common flower, that grow'st beside the way
Fringing the dusty road with harmless gold,
First pledge of blithesome May,
Which children pluck, and full of pride uphold,
High-hearted buccaneers, o'erjoyed that they
An Eldorado in the grass have found,
Which not the rich earth's ample round
May match in wealth, thou art more dear to me
Than all the prouder summer blooms may be.

It is said to be one of the five bitter herbs that the Jews were required to eat during the Feast of Passover.

Although as a coffee substitute common dandelion roots (best dug up in the Autumn) produce a coarser alternative (while still offering tonic and stimulant qualities) they do have the advantage of being both cheaper and free of caffeine. In England the counties of Berkshire and Worcestershire used to be particularly noted for their partiality to dandelion wine made from the flowers. And in the 19th and early 20th Centuries among the potteries and furnaces of the industrial Midlands tonic herb beers were particularly popular and dandelion beer lead the selection.

The common dandelion (this particular species) was introduced to North America in the 16th Century and was well-established there by the time the Pilgrim Fathers landed on the North American seaboard in November 1620. On that Continent many Indian tribes came to use the plant as elsewhere in the world. The Maidu Indians of Colorado and the Apache tribes in Arizona ate the raw or cooked young leaves, both the Kiowa and the Menominee cooked the leaves as greens, and the latter often used maple sap vinegar instead of water to boil them in. Leaves and stems provided a vegetable for the Meskwaki, Mohican, Iroquois, Okanagan-Colville, Malecite, Cherokee, some of the Tohono O'Odham, the Ute and the Micmac Indian tribes. Both the Potawatomi tribe and some of the Chippewa ate the cooked vegetable particularly with pork or venison. Apart from food the Iroquois also used this plant to make wine, and some of the Apache flavoured drinks with the flowers.

Before going further mention ought to be made of an unexpected recorded use. The hollow stems (their milky juice removed) were made into whistles by North American Hesquiat Indians.

Early European settlers in North America (like the Menominee and other Indian tribes) prepared them with maple sap vinegar. In some parts of the United States the dried leaves have been sold and used as a tea. Today the Pennsylvania Dutch community celebrate Maundy Thursday in the Christian calendar with a dandelion salad dressed with hot cider vinegar and sugar.

Maoris in New Zealand (where this species was eventually introduced by European settlers) ate the unopened flower heads and the young leaves of a closely related native species as well as in due time the leaves of this (European) species once it was established there.

Records of a past famine in Minorca caused by an infestation of locusts that devastated the countryside indicate that the local people allege their survival during this period was due to the nourishment provided by common dandelion leaves and roots.

Then in the 2nd World War both the German and British nations were urged to eat the young leaves as a salad vegetable. In modern Greece side dishes of bitter greens (which can include common dandelion) are served coated with olive oil. The Japanese, the French-Canadians and the French have all used the young roots as both a raw salad vegetable and cooked them like parsnips (*Pastinaca sativa*). These leaves as an alternative to garden lettuce (*Lactuca sativa*) maintain their popularity in France where they can be seen for sale in the markets, and today they are still cultivated in France and the Netherlands and are commercially grown in the United States as well. The Arabs who as mentioned earlier are believed to have first promoted this versatile plant in Europe prepare it as food to this day and the buds are still found as an ingredient in a traditional *yublo* cake.

Bees are particularly partial to common dandelions, especially in the early Spring when the flowers abound with pollen and nectar – so much so that they can be distracted from pollinating fruit trees if there are too many growing nearby. However bees are in the company of a reported 93 other insect species drawn to this plant. As an example of companion planting dandelion could be considered to excel. Apparently its flowers emit ethylene (a gas that ripens fruit) and for this reason orchard farmers often encourage good dandelion crops underneath their trees – notwithstanding providing a possible diversion for the bees.

Despite its lowly reputation it is considered by many that this European plant is one of the most valuable not least because all parts of it can be used with no ill effects. First medicinal records with reference to common dandelion may be those of the 10th and 11th Century Arabian physicians, and in Britain those of the Welsh in the 13th Century. In eastern India and in Persia (now Iran) common dandelions have been cultivated specifically to treat liver complaints.

After their introduction to North America many Indian tribes including the Quileute, Cherokee and Hoh absorbed the plant into their medicinal repertoire. Both the Kiowa and some of the Tohono O'Odham tribes made a flower decoction (with mint leaves, *Mentha*) as a remedy for period cramps. It was used by some of the Chippewa Indians and by the Rappahannock for easing indigestion, and both the Bella Coola and Aleut tribes took it for stomach upsets. The plant provided a laxative for Delaware, Mohican and Iroquois Indians, while the Iroquois used it to cause vomiting when this was necessary. Some female disorders were treated with it by the Chippewa, and Iroquois and Meskwaki Indians valued it for general lung ailments. It was used for blood disorders by some of the Chippewa, the Iroquois, Rappahannock, some of the Algonkin and the Cherokee Indians. In addition Iroquois Indians used the plant as a treatment for kidney problems, urinary ailments, fluid retention, pain, sore eyes and like the Cherokee toothache. The Aleut tribe applied a leaf poultice for sore throats, and they also applied common dandelion to skin problems, as did the Iroquois tribe and some of the Algonkin tribe. On top of this the plant offered a tonic for Shinnecock, Potawatomi and Mohican Indians.

Medicinally, herbalists in the West and country-folk generally preferred using dandelion juice (particularly that extracted from the root) which is one of the most active derivatives. It was primarily recommended for treating kidney and liver disorders, anaemia, jaundice, skin disorders, rheumatism and fluid retention. The stem juice was also popular as a remedy for warts. Today common dandelion is still recognized as a remedy for liver and kidney disorders and rheumatism, and it is also accepted as a general tonic and is used in homoeopathic treatments.

Common dandelion leaves are not least a rich source of beta-carotene, calcium, iron and Vitamin A. It is understood that the American Cancer Society believes that a diet consisting of a high content of plants that contain beta-carotene could be able to reduce the risk of contracting some forms of cancer.

It is the birthday flower for 27th September.