



From Wish To Weed: Our Love-hate Relationship With Dandelions

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URBANA — To a child, a dandelion is a magical thing. It's one of the first plants we learn to recognize. The bright yellow flowers make cheerful bouquets, necklaces, and crowns. The fluffy white seed heads become wishes when we squeeze our eyes shut and blow.

Adults, especially home gardeners striving for a perfectly manicured lawn, tend to be less fond of this deep-rooted, cool-season, non-native perennial.

“Believe it or not, dandelion seeds are available for purchase from garden seed catalog companies,” says [Jennifer Fishburn](#), a horticulture educator with [University of Illinois Extension](#).

Common dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale*, is easily recognized by a basal rosette of deeply cut leaves, a long taproot, and a hollow stem that supports yellow flowers. The yellow flower is actually a composite of several flowers, each able to make a parachute-like brown seed that can be carried aloft several miles by the wind. The stalk can support as many as 100 to 300 flowers.

Fishburn says there are a couple of potential reasons that gardeners may want to cultivate dandelions.

Pollinating insects will visit dandelion flowers to collect pollen and nectar. While dandelions may not have the most nutritious pollen, they can still be an important food source when there aren't many other flowers available. Dandelions will flower throughout the year but mainly appear in early spring or late fall.

They also have several culinary uses. Most recipes use the leaves, which are taste slightly bitter. Tender leaves, harvested in the spring before plants bloom, can be eaten raw, while older leaves are cooked. Use the leaves in salads, soups, as cooked greens, and in potato salad. The flowers can be made into wine or jelly.

If you are not a dandelion fan, it is possible to get rid of them, but ensuring that they won't return requires some effort. Dandelions prefer to grow in a moist, sunny location, but will also grow in shade. If the soil is moist, a small dandelion can be successfully removed by hand.

"Moist conditions make the job easier," says Fishburn, "but even with moist soil, it is difficult to pull a dandelion and remove the entire taproot."

A dandelion can grow a six to 18-inch taproot. Leaving behind even a 1-inch section can result in a new plant.

A properly maintained, healthy, dense stand of turfgrass is the best defense against weed invasions. If necessary, Fishburn suggests doing a spot treatment in early fall with postemergence herbicides.

"This is when the dandelion plant is taking food from the leaves and storing it in the roots," says Fishburn. "When using herbicides, always read and follow label directions carefully."

Whether the sight of these bright yellow flowers dotting a lawn makes you cringe or makes you smile, these plants are connected to memories of summer, childhood, and magic.

SOURCE: [Jennifer Fishburn](#), Horticulture Educator, University of Illinois Extension

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