

Dandelion: both beauty and beast

“Nature distributed medicine everywhere.” –Pliny the Elder, AD77

Dandelion (*Herba Taraxaci*) must surely have been one of the plants Pliny the Elder had in mind when he made this declaration. It defies categories, qualifying as a weed, food, medicinal herb and stirrer of childlike inspiration. I suspect that memories connecting us to dandelions are nearly universal, at least for those of us who live in the northern hemisphere (dandelions aren't native to most of the southern hemisphere). Some of the more common memories include blowing one of the puffballs of seed and watching it explode, swiping a freshly picked yellow blossom below the chin of someone dear, or picking a handsome bouquet of the flowers for mom only to discover our palms freckled from the white milk of the stems. Maude Grieve, an early twentieth century British herbalist shared this wonder that lies in a dandelion bloom when she wrote:

Each bloom is made up of numerous strap-shaped florets of a bright golden yellow. This strap-shaped corolla is notched at the edge into five teeth, each tooth representing a petal, and lower down is narrowed into a single claw-like tube, which rests on the single-chambered ovary containing a single ovule. In this tiny tube is a copious supply of nectar, which more than half fills it, and the presence of which provides the incentive for the visits of many insects, among whom the bee takes first rank...By carefully watching, it has been ascertained that no less than ninety-three different kinds of insects are in the habit of frequenting it.

The genus *Taraxacum* includes 60 species, of which the species *officinale* has a long tradition of use in Europe and North America, being mentioned in an herbal as early as 1485 (though Pliny may have described it much earlier). That herbal likened it to a lion's tooth (*Dens leonis* in Latin) and possibly resulted in the name dandelion, a corruption of the French *Dent de Lion*. There is some debate over whether the serrated edges of the leaves, the yellow tooth-like flower petals, or the white root provided the inspiration. *Taraxacum mongolicum* and *sinicum*, two species of Asian dandelion, are widely used in traditional Chinese medicine. *Pu Gong Ying* (pronounced Poo Gong Yeeng) as it is called in Mandarin Chinese, was first described as a medicinal herb by Su Jing ca. AD659. This herb also has had a significant role in Ayurveda, the traditional medicine of India and was used by ancient herbalists in Persia.

With a reputation of being bitter in taste, dandelion is only moderately so among the pantheon of bitter herbs. Try making some artichoke leaf tea, and you will know the truth of this! Though it may not seem obvious, dandelion is also a bit sweet, though this flavor is secondary. It is this strongly bitter flavor which provides its medicinal action when combined with other herbs, of clearing excess heat from the body, especially the liver, resulting in reduction of inflammation, swelling or certain infections in the regions of the breasts, skin, throat, lungs, intestines and eyes. Since dandelion has some diuretic action, it is also included in herb formulas for treating some types of jaundice and painful urination that result from accumulation of a combination of heat and dampness.

At their best when eaten as a vegetable, dandelion leaves, are less bitter and more tender when fresh and young, especially in the spring. Traditionally, the leaves were sometimes blanched by covering the immature them as they grew during the winter and early spring. Good quality leaves are available in the local markets. The trick to making them palatable is to think of them as a blending ingredient. Tear them into small pieces (perhaps also blanch them) and add them to other greens in a salad. They can add a hint of bitter for an additional layer of flavor in a soup. Or steam them half and half with spinach or chard. A bit of lemon juice complements the bitter flavor in any of these dishes. A few leaves can be blended in if you are making a vegetable juice. As an herbal tea dandelion is also nearly always blended with other herbs, a normal dosage being 10 grams (about 2 teaspoons) of dried or fresh whole herb (includes leaf, root and flower). Tinctures, which are usually made with the root only, are also available.

Dandelion wine seems to have acquired a kind of mythological reputation, a drink most have heard of but relatively few of us have sampled. The wine is actually made from the blossoms rather than the leaves, which are fermented with sugar, ginger, orange and lemon resulting in a sort of sherry-like drink. Traditionally, in Europe and North America, the roots have sometimes been roasted to make a caffeine-free coffee substitute.

Dandelion is generally a very safe herb. In large doses it occasionally can result in mild diarrhea. Rarely, allergic reactions have resulted in hives, itching skin or temporary digestive problems. If you harvest your own dandelions, make sure they have been grown in an area where they have not been subjected to herbicides or pesticides.

I have come to understand that paradox is dandelion's strong suit. It is a kind of beauty and beast among herbs. The flowers have a softness and complexity which is irresistible, while the herb possesses an edgy bitter taste. The roots extend so deep it is almost impossible to eradicate, yet its seeds can be blown away with a breath. In folklore it is said to be a kind of clock, with flowers opening at 5 minutes after 5 in the morning and closing at 9 minutes after 8 in the evening. I have not noticed they are quite this precise in their timing, though they are quite regular. In contrast, the action of the herb is to aid us in cooling and hence relaxing some of the areas of the body where we are most inclined to hold tension. So this plant reflects the diverse qualities of beauty and harshness, tenacity and spontaneity, structure and relaxation,. No wonder it is a survivor nearly everywhere, has seeped so far into our collective memories, and continues to fascinate us.

This article is provided as a public service by Nathan Kaehler, MA, LAc, Ojai Herb and Acupuncture Clinic, www.ojaiherbs.com. It is provided as general information rather than professional advice.