

YUMMY NORTHWEST

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Eat weeds

If there was a garden in your childhood, perhaps you earned pocket money like I did, destroying dandelions. Maybe you heard your parents cursing the ubiquitous yellow flowers each spring as efforts failed to control their determined spread across the lawn.

Maybe you learned to make pretty dandelion chains or had wishes come true after blowing the puffy seedheads.

But if you were truly lucky, you ate dandelions and were taught that they were a nutritious vegetable.

If dandelions have never been on your menu, read on. Perhaps you will soon be outside cultivating the sturdy plants instead of spraying weed killer on them.



Dig into dandelions

Dandelions first bloomed somewhere in Asia. The bitter herbs prescribed for the first Passover might well have been dandelions.

Eventually dandelions made their way to the Americas, perhaps attached to the footwear of Vikings or as part of a cargo of plants brought over by European settlers.

Dandelions spread quickly in the temperate climate and were used by everyone for food and medicine. In Europe and the United States, the yellow flowers were also cultivated as prize-winning show plants.

So it was no surprise that pioneers made special efforts to bring dandelions to the West. In the mid 1800s, Catherine Maynard, wife of the famed Doc Maynard, planted the first Washington State dandelions in Seattle. In Oregon, Dr. Perry Prettyman began growing them near



Gather dandelions

For mildest flavor, gather dandelion greens in early spring before the flowers open. Roots are best harvested in fall for roasting, but they can be dug up at any time to eat as a steamed vegetable. Flowers are gathered while in full bloom.

If you're willing to pay up to \$3 for a bunch, many markets sell dandelion greens during spring and summer. If they are not available at your local store, ask the produce department to order some.

A couple of warnings

As with any food, you may be sensitive to dandelions. It is best to be especially cautious if you have any health concerns, such as gallbladder stones. Do your own research and consult with your doctor to make sure dandelions are safe for you to eat.

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Do not eat dandelions that have been sprayed or fertilized with chemicals, or that grow along roadsides. And be careful with any that have been watered by local dogs.

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Portland in 1847. In Montana, credit for the first dandelions goes to Mrs. Martin Barrett and Mrs. Philip Poindexter in Beaverhead County.

Today a few folks still sing praises to these plants. You can listen to the "Dandelion Song" by Washington State singer Linda Allen, online at www.lindasongs.com/pages/washington1.htm.

Their ability to flourish has no doubt led to dandelions being categorized as weeds. In fact, there is no real definition of "weed" other than a plant that thrives where someone says it shouldn't.

While many homeowners ruthlessly target dandelions for destruction, several companies, such as Territorial Seed Company in Oregon, sell gourmet dandelion seeds imported from Europe.

They endure

No wonder common dandelions flourish. These perennial plants have all sorts of survival tricks, from the tip of their taproot to the top of their parachute seeds.

The root can go down almost a foot into the ground. If it is cut, each piece can become a separate plant.

Stems are able to grow several feet tall – whatever it takes to get above the surrounding vegetation. The flowerheads (in fact comprising many tiny flowers) are happy to be pollinated but are able to pollinate themselves if necessary.

Sometimes there are double flowerheads on the plant, which means more seeds. And how cleverly those seeds spread. The fluffy parachute attached to each seed closes when the weather is wet and opens in dry, windy weather. But they don't need to fly. Their barbs attach nicely to any

continued next page

passing creature or material, and although they will eventually fall off, they can wait a long time until growing conditions are right.

Even supposing you pull up the entire plant, including its long root, seeds will form nonetheless from the dead flower. Plants left in the ground will lie dormant through freezing weather, to rise again in spring.

They absorb

Dandelions are used to measure pollution levels because they readily absorb what is around them in the air and soil.

Weaker plants nearby can die when dandelions greedily take in nutrients in the soil. This is what makes dandelions so healthy to eat, but it also means that if there are any pollutants in the area, dandelions will be full of the bad stuff, too. For this reason, do not consume dandelions that grow near roadsides.

Dandelions improve soil by bringing nutrients up to the top level. A tea made from the dead plants makes a good fertilizer. Orchard owners have mixed feelings about dandelions. They produce ethylene to help ripen fruit but during pollination, bees prefer dandelion flowers to fruit blossoms.

They nourish

One way to properly dispose of dandelions is to eat them.

The United States Department of Agriculture ranks dandelions as one of the overall top five most nutritious vegetables, above broccoli and spinach.

Per cup, raw dandelions supply 103 mg of calcium, while milk has 276 mg, commercial soy milk 80 mg, and broccoli 43 mg.

Dandelions have more beta carotene (that safely converts to Vitamin A in the body) than carrots and plenty of Vitamin C, iron, and potassium.

It is their potassium content that makes dandelions a safe diuretic, unlike manufactured varieties. A remedy for bedwetting is to give the child a dandelion beverage in the morning; by bedtime all extra fluids should have left their system.

They heal

For centuries dandelions have been used for medicine as their Latin name,

Enjoy dandelions

Dandelion greens taste bitter, there's no doubt about it. But so do many dark greens that are good for you, like spinach, kale, and mustard greens.

You can substitute dandelion greens in almost any recipe that calls for such greens. Or chop them and add to any dish with lots of spices, like enchiladas.

Mix them with other bitter salad greens, such as arugula or radicchio, and add your choice of bacon-flavored bits, sweet tomatoes, mangoes, pungent cheese (like Gorgonzola), crunchy nuts, and a vinegary dressing. Strongly flavored foods help mask the bitterness.

Freeze greens for winter use after blanching them.

There are many recipes that use every part of the dandelion plant. Flowers go into jellies and wine, are used as cake decorations, and added to a famous Pennsylvania Dutch gravy. Roots can be peeled and cooked like potatoes, or roasted and ground to use as a coffee substitute that some **Yummy** readers say is tasty.

Look online for recipes. Edibleweeds.com and GrannysStore.com are great places to start.

Don't forget to check your own cookbooks. You'll be surprised to find how many have guidelines for preparing dandelions.



Taraxacum officinale, indicates. 'Officinale' attached to a plant name means it is considered medicinal.

The first medicinal use of dandelions was described in an 11th century journal written by Arab doctors. By the 16th century, British physicians were using the plants in their treatments.

Throughout Europe and Asia, dandelions are still used to impart health. In Europe, plants are brought inside homes to grow throughout the winter for fresh greens.

An old Montana cookbook lists dandelions as a cure for liver trouble: drink a cup of tea each morning and evening.

Dandelions still appear in many natural remedies for liver cleansing and PMS, and are readily available in dried form in health food stores.

In Maine, dandelion greens are eagerly sought each spring for health tonics, and Belle of Maine has been canning them since 1886.

They surprise

Our common dandelion is only one of hundreds of varieties found around the world. The milky latex-filled sap of a Russian dandelion has been used for making rubber in Russia. Even the common dandelion of the U.S. provided a bit of rubber during World War II.

They entertain

Go to your local library to find many books about the dandelion, both fiction and nonfiction. Movies and music have been named for the plant.

Once you begin looking, you will find dandelions everywhere. Perhaps it is time to start enjoying them.



About Yummy Northwest

Each monthly issue highlights an edible delight available in the Pacific Northwest.

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