

DANDELION—“LION’S TOOTH”

ECOLOGY • FOLKLORE • FOOD • MEDICINE

Elnora A. Old
Coyote



In a field of rank, green grass, brazen, shaggy blossoms raise their yellow faces, with wavy, ragged leaves (nutritious green, rich in vitamins).

Stem and root (filled with bitter, milky fluid, for flavoring and for healing).

Flowers (a hundred golden rays, each complete with anthers, stamens, pistil, ovary and seeds), and nectar (honey-sweet for bees, for songbirds, and for me to make my “dent de lion” wine).

*“Lion’s tooth”—*Taraxacum officinale*—the dandelion! No hothouse flower this—no protected pet.*

Instead, a target of lawn mower, killer sprays, two-pronged digging tool—often neglected, trammelled, cursed!

First flower to bloom in spring, last to grow in fall.

With tap-root deep—even a persistent digger cannot dig it all. The tiniest missed tip will sprout anew. And seeds, a hundred, parachute-borne, waft away on a wisp of wind to land and grow again.

DANDELION: *Cichoriaceae*
CHICORY FAMILY

Taraxacum officinale Weber or
Leontodon taraxacum L.

Northern Cheyenne name:
HEYOV STA MO’ E

Dandelion, a biennial or perennial herb, is probably one of the most common plants in the world. This plant of many-rayed, vivid-yellow flowers grows all over Eurasia and North America. In Middle English, it was called *dent-de-lion*, from Old French, as translated from Latin, *dens leonis*, or “lion’s tooth.” From early times, the leaves, when tender and new, were eaten raw or boiled as greens, and the flowers have been harvested and fermented into wine.

The dandelion is cheerfully welcomed in spring, especially by people who look forward to the first blossoms and who consider that all plants play an important role in our ecosystem. But because of its wide distribution and growing persistence, especially on our groomed lawns, the dandelion is often considered as a weed, and its many values and uses are forgotten or ignored.

DESCRIPTION

The dandelion has a composite golden-yellow head of many flowers—each with a petal-like, yellow, tubular structure that opens into a flat ray with two-parted stigma emerging at the top. Each flower has all its parts, with honey deep within.

The flowers have long, hollow stems, milky when broken. The leaves are long, jagged, dissected and basal. And the root is a deep tap-root. Each rayed flower is surrounded by fine, white, silky hairs, called a pappus, growing on top of the seeds. When mature, these become umbrella-like, so the seeds float away easily on a soft breeze, land and sprout.

Surrounding the flower-head is a double row of green bracts, with the upper row enclosing the flowerhead and spreading as the head spreads, and the lower row quickly bending downward.

ECOLOGY

Among plants and animals, there are always those species that have abundant positive characteristics for long-term survival. In the animal group, the coyote is such a creature. And among plants, it would be hard to find one more successful at surviving than the dandelion! Its blooms are early and bright to attract many bees, who unwittingly carry pollen from flower stigma to flower stigma, ensuring hundreds of fertile seeds.

The dandelion grows almost





in a cool place. Let the wine age for at least a year, but the older the better!

MEDICINAL USES

Medicinally, the bitter flower stems and roots of the dandelion have long been used as a tonic, a liver stimulant, a diuretic, and a mild laxative. The main medicinal constituents in the roots and leaves are *taraxasterol* and *taraxerol*, both of which are water soluble, hence can be extracted by boiling, steeping, or just soaking in water. Other constituents include choline, fructose, inulin, and mannite in early spring.

The leaves contain inositol. Hence the leaves and roots are a safe, mild diuretic, increasing water and other waste products in urine. A fresh tincture, made of early spring roots, taken frequently in 1/4 teaspoonfuls, has been used for kidney inflammations, and for restorative therapy after hepatitis. All parts of the dandelion have a mildly stimulating effect on the liver. A teaspoonful of fresh, root tincture in frequent doses, or a tablespoonful of the ground or chopped roots, will allay liver or spleen congestion.

There are no toxic effects from dandelions, so large quantities can be drunk as tea. To dissolve urinary stones, as much as an ounce of chopped roots, boiled in water, can be drunk several times a day, or two tablespoons of a tincture, twice a day in water, for at least ten days. For chronic constipation related to long-term illness or old age, or simply as a tonic or liver stimulant, taking

leaf. If it is still bitter, cover again with boiling water, and again strain through a colander. Add butter or margarine, salt, pepper, and a few drops of vinegar as desired. Eat as spinach.

DANDELION COFFEE SUBSTITUTE

Dig enough deep, brown tap-roots. Wash roots thoroughly to remove all soil. Place roots in a frying pan, stir and cook until dry, or place the roots on a shallow baking pan and bake in the oven until dry. Then grind the cooked roots in a food grinder



(or pound them, as did the Native Americans, with a rock on another bowl-like rock). Use the finely ground or pounded root powder for coffee.

DANDELION WINE

Wash 4 quarts of freshly picked dandelion blossoms (no stems), plus a handful of leaves. Put into a stone jar with 4 quarts of boiling water and 4 lemons, with seeds removed. Put a weight on top (a plate with a rock on it, for example). Let stand in a warm place for 2 days (no longer). Then strain and add 3 1/2 pounds of sugar (7 cups). Put back in jar, let stand 10 days in a warm place. (Cover with a cloth.) After 10 days, bottle, putting corks in loosely. Store



any place in open sunlight, along exposed stream banks, frequently in the gullies of eroding meadows, but also under forest trees. The bright yellow blossoms are the first to spring up everywhere, it seems, from sea level to timberline. Because it grows in early spring and persists through three seasons, the dandelion is a good food source for grazing animals, providing seeds for birds, the sweetest nectar for honey bees, and many food and medicinal uses for people.

FOLKLORE, FOOD & MEDICINE

The delicate, early growth leaves are great in spring salads, or boiled as greens or in stews. Dandelion roots have been roasted, pounded and used as a coffee substitute. Both dandelion honey and dandelion wine are delectable.



DANDELION GREENS

Pick enough green leaves, the earlier in spring and the younger the bet-

ter, to fill a family-sized kettle. Cover with water and boil. Drain off the first water, which will be bitter. Taste a

2 teaspoons of the bitter root, boiled in water, 3 to 4 times a day, was reported to be helpful.

Northern Cheyenne Indians daily chewed the fresh flower stems for quick relief of chronic liver inflammation. Roots eaten raw, or the dried roots taken as an infusion, were found to purify the blood, improve digestion of food, and were used as a diuretic or for a stimulating effect. In spring, the root contains levulose, a sugar easily assimilated by diabetics. In fall, this sugar changes to inulin, a starch that can be used by diabetics.



Cheyennes used all parts of dandelions for building blood, curing anemic conditions, and for disorders of the liver and gallbladder.



INDIAN DAY OF THE "LION'S TOOTH"

In spring, the Crow Indian College in south central Montana had a campout at Yellowtail Dam on the Big Horn River, for students from grade school to college. Dr. Lanny Real Bird was in charge and I, Elnora Old Coyote, taught lessons in ecology. Thus it began!

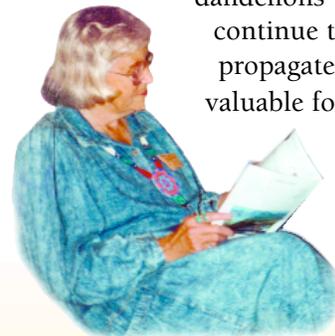
The entire area, hill and dale, was covered with yellow blossoms of dandelions. First, we each picked one to hold under someone's chin to see if they liked butter. Every chin reflected yellow—so every person liked butter! Then we hiked up the hills for the ecology lesson. There were yellow pines, new grasses, shrubs in leaf, but the day belonged to dandelions!

The students knew how to braid and when we came down from that space, every one was adorned with dandelion bracelets, necklaces or crowns. They gave me a necklace and crowned Dr. Lanny with dandelions. Bouquets went to the kitchen for the cooks. And a crown was received and worn by a very stern handyman. Each human was bedecked. And there wasn't a yellow blossom left on the hill! Dr. Lanny bowed his crowned head and said a prayer for all, for the dandelion bounty, and for all the adorned humans.



FORAGE FOR ANIMALS

Since it is one of the earliest spring plants, dandelions are welcome forage for all classes of livestock, especially sheep. Because of their low-growing, abundant basal leaves, which elude lawn mower and animal eating, their deep, stout tap-root, and their many, widely scattered seeds, dandelions will continue to propagate as valuable forage. ■



DR. ELNORA (STENERSEN) OLD COYOTE, age 86, grew up in Eastern Montana and married John M. Old Coyote, a full-blooded Crow Indian. With the help of many tribal people, she has been researching and teaching the use of native plants for many years. She has studied and written about over 300 Montana plants. Included here are her notes on ecology and folklore, and her original sketches and poems. Elnora lives in Huntley, Montana, and can be reached at (406) 348-2474.