

A Good Year for Dandelions!

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I've noticed quite a few lawns lately that are more yellow than green. The cool temperatures we've experienced this spring and the wetter conditions have certainly been favorable for the growth of dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*). However, this cool-season perennial tolerates many cultural conditions and soil types and can be found in most lawns.



Currently, the flowers are the most noticeable part of the plant. They are most abundant in the spring but can appear year around if conditions are favorable. They are yellow and up to 2-in. in diameter. They are borne singly on hollow, smooth stalks that can grow up to 20 in. tall. Within a few days the flowers become round, grayish-white puffballs of wind-dispersed seeds. In fact another name for this weed is blow-ball. The flowers can be attractive, when not in your own lawn of course. Children will pick them by the handfuls yet they don't make a very good cut flower due to their quick transition into seed heads. Currently, my family waits for my daughter's filled vase on the kitchen table to develop seeds. Hey, it's a teachable moment. My kids have been warned about blowing the puff balls around the house (another teachable moment I'd like to avoid). Dandelion forms a rosette of leaves which are narrow and deeply lobed. The leaves grow 2 to 10 in. long and up to 2½ in. wide, staying green year around. The lobes are jagged and point back toward the leaf base. A notable look-a-like species is shepherd's-purse which develops narrower leaves and is a winter annual. Chicory is similar but the lobes do not always point toward the leaf base. In addition, dandelion's leaves, flower stalks, and taproot exude a milky juice when cut.

Dandelion has a long, sturdy taproot. In fact, you can cut the taproot in half and count the rings to learn the plant's age. This activity can keep bored children entertained on those long summer days for minutes I'm sure. Blowing the seeds may provide longer periods of entertainment. Of course this weed spreads by seeds and broken taproot pieces. Preemergent herbicides such as isoxaben (Gallery) can be effective on preventing new plants. Postemergent herbicides that are systemic can move down to the roots to control dandelion fairly effectively. Some examples for use in lawns include 2,4-D, dicamba, triclopyr, MCPP, MCPA, florasulam, carfentrazone, mesotrione, and quinclorac. Various combination products are available as well and can be useful in controlling additional weed species. Apply postemergence herbicides during periods of active growth in mid spring to early summer and/or mid to late autumn; preemergence herbicides should be applied before seed germination. If you wish to use ingredients from a natural source rather than traditional synthetic chemicals, a good one to try on dandelion is one that contains the active ingredient Iron HEDTA (FeHEDTA) (Ortho Elementals Lawn Weed Killer and others). For additional information regarding other chemical weed controls or other weeds, see the *2010 Commercial Landscape and Turfgrass Pest*

Be sure to read, understand, and follow the label directions for proper use of these chemicals.

If mishandled or misapplied, these herbicides may damage or kill many desirable ornamental or edible plants in the landscape or nearby garden. Check the label for specific guidance on where the product can or cannot be applied and for rain-free period (rain-fast) information.

With persistence, dandelions can be controlled without chemicals. The roots may be dug up and dandelion forks are great for this. Be sure to remove as much of the root as possible. Remaining root pieces can send up new leaves. Repeated digging can be used to eventually deplete the plant's food reserves.

Dandelions and other weeds have a difficult time growing in healthy, dense turf. Achieve a lush lawn by using proper cultural practices. Mow often to remove seed heads before seed maturation. However, mowing higher can shade out weeds such as dandelion. For additional information regarding using cultural practices to control and prevent weeds in home lawns, see the Pest Management for the Home Landscape handbook. Both handbooks mentioned in this article are available for sale at <https://pubsplus.illinois.edu/>.

And if you can't beat them, eat them! The young leaves are delicious in salads and rich in vitamin A. Just make sure they haven't been sprayed with weed killer first! My family ate dandelion greens instead of lettuce this spring and never knew the difference. According to my Peterson Field Guide on Edible Wild Plants, the flowers are excellent dipped in batter and fried, but then again most things dipped in batter and then fried are excellent in my opinion. Alternatively, you can mix the blossoms with a lot of sugar and some other key ingredients to make wine. Why again don't people like dandelions? (*Michelle Wiesbrook*)

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