

Dandelion *Taraxacum officinale*

What's in a name?

The name, 'dandelion' originated in France and when translated means "the lion's tooth". This very symbolic association refers to the courage of the animal, its pride and the level of connection and communication within the family which might be difficult to see now as many people see this plant as a weed. The name also has Greek roots, meaning "to soothe" and it was with this in mind that early herbalists initially used it (see below).

Botany & Ecology

This is a perennial herbaceous plant and a member of the Asteraceae family, which flowers between March and October. The yellow flower head tops a tubular, hairless stalk and can grow 10-50cm in height. The root system is much like that of a carrot which can grow up to 150cm long. The dark green, coarse leaves stay close to the ground and form a rosette around the base of the stalk.



Once over, the flower creates a ball of fine hairs each with a parachute type head. There are between 50 and 150 seeds per flower which can travel several hundred meters in the lightest of winds. Each plant may flower once a month during the year. This rather unassuming plant is the food source for some 12 different species of insect. The leaves are the food plant for eight different moths, whilst the nectar is a favourite with the Small Tortoise Shell butterfly, the Common Carder Bee and two different species of hoverfly.

Folklore

One legend surrounding these flowers was that the tallest dandelion stalk a child could find in the early spring would show how much taller they will grow in the coming year. It was also said that if you make a wish immediately before blowing on a dandelion seed head, your wish would come true!

Another belief was that the number of seeds left after blowing the seed head indicated the number of children that a girl would have in later life. Others claim that the number of seeds remaining after blowing the seed head

will indicate the number of years we might have left to live. A more common belief is that it was possible to tell the time of day after blowing on the seed head. This gave rise to the term 'dandelion clock'.

Folk Medicine

Right from the early days of folk medicine, this plant received a lot of attention and continues to be a cure for a wide variety of ailments. The range of tea, coffee, wine and syrups now available through modern day herbalists is significant but must be used under professional guidance. The leaves are high in vitamin A, B2 and C, and were used in salads and sandwiches across much of the agricultural community as a supplement.

In Ireland, those with heart trouble were encouraged to eat a leaf a day for three consecutive days. Originally, the white latex juice found in the stem and leaves was used to treat warts. However, the juice found in the root contains other minerals and this source was used to cleanse or sooth the kidneys.

The root also contains powerful diuretics and children were actively dissuaded from playing with the plant as they might wet the bed. The Mediaeval monks prescribed it to revive the appetite and the metabolism after the winter and to treat jaundice. When made into a wine, it was recommended that it be warmed and drunk to cure common coughs and colds.

