

A P R I L 2 0 1 0

Feeling Toxic? Try Taraxacum, the Dandy Detox Plant



By: Richard Vuksinic, ND



The snow has melted; some of that winter fat is starting to melt away too. When it does, all of those idle toxins incurred over the winter months (and stored in your fat cells) will be liberated from your “love handles” and find their way into your bloodstream. Here, they can circulate until they find a home in your tissues and joints, laying the foundation for future pain and inflammation, *OR* they can be eliminated from your body, making room for a guilt-free summer of beer drinking and barbecuing - not that I am advocating beer, meat or guilt-less pleasure.

What I am advocating is for you to EAT YOUR WEEDS... or brew them, or roast them, or take them, or sip them or...

Before even the most resilient cultivated green comes to life, another plant presents itself. A delightfully bitter herb that provides unrivalled nutrients, cleanses the blood, stimulates the liver, nourishes the gut – and hey, it goes great with a boiled potato or two – Taraxacum!

More commonly known as Dandelion, *Taraxacum officinale* is one of the most commonly used plants in both the European and North American herbal pharmacopeias (*taraxos* – internal disorder, *akos* – remedy). During the spring, its power resides in its leaves, during the summer months, its flowers, and in the autumn, its roots. For each of these seasons, there are wonderful, traditional ways to prepare this medicinal food. Spring salad, summer wine, autumn tea or coffee substitute.

The understanding of Dandelion’s benefits and uses is consistent in a number of cultures. In Chinese Medicine, spring is associated with the gall bladder and liver, and Dandelion is noted as a very effective tonic for both of these organs. In fact, freshly squeezed leaf juice can be helpful in the treatment of Liver cancer, anywhere from 5ml-30ml/day of the juice (in conjunction with other treatments of course)(5). Ayurveda (the traditional system of medicine in India) also points to its use as a liver tonic. Native Americans used it as a gentle laxative (this may be consistent with its effects on the liver & gall bladder), stomach tonic and diuretic (3). This is also true in regards to its traditional uses in Europe.

In many European cultures, dandelion is picked early in the spring, when the leaves are still very young. The slightly bitter leaves are often combined with warm potatoes, or eggs, oil and vinegar and eaten as a salad.

A survival food and medicine in post war Europe, the modern world treats this healing plant with ironic disdain. It is a plant with the ability to detoxify and nourish us, yet we spray it with toxic herbicides for the sake of the perfect lawn. Reason be spared!

Dandelion is not simply a survival food. It is a local “super food” and makes for a highly nutritious meal. The leaves alone contain the highest amount of Vitamin A found in any leafy green (5). They also contain carotenoids, Vitamins B, C, D1, potassium, iron, copper, silicon, magnesium, sodium, zinc, manganese, phosphorus, choline, fatty acids and flavonoids (5).

The leaves have mostly a diuretic effect (diuretic = promotes urination) and likely contribute to the plant’s reputation as a “blood cleanser”. This diuretic action can be very beneficial after a long, stagnant winter, in which diets are likely lacking fibre, various micronutrients and when the body’s metabolism is emerging from its sluggishness. The diuretic effects of Dandelion make it one of the best plant medicines for the treatment of chronic rheumatism (gout and arthritis) (6). It likely does this by flushing out tissues and removing metabolic waste products that deposit themselves in joints and tissues. Unlike most pharmaceutical diuretics, dandelion leaf spares potassium from being leached from the body (6).

Once the early spring has past, Dandelion flowers begin to carpet many meadows and lawns. This is when the leaves become too bitter to use. The flowers become the active part of the plant. They add colour to the landscape and can be used more recreationally than medicinally, as a wine.

The beauty of dandelion wine adds to its lore as a super plant. Dandelion wine making is a simple process. It requires flowers, water, sugar, yeast and some patience (there are numerous recipes available on the internet). The final product can be very refreshing, suggestive of a light sherry, while maintaining its “reputation as an excellent tonic, extremely good for the blood”(7).

However, if you have spent your summer sipping too much dandelion wine (or beer and BBQs) you may want to consider digging up some dandelion root in the fall. It is the roots that have the greatest healing potential for the liver and gall bladder. The roots can be taken in several ways. They can be dried and roasted and used as a coffee substitute (which, if you like your coffee, is a bit of a stretch). They can be extracted in alcohol, or simply made into a tea. Three cups of dandelion root tea a day, for 3 weeks in the fall is a wonderful way to cleanse and nourish not only your liver, but also improve your gut health.

During the fall months, the *inulin* content of dandelion roots can be as high as 40% (up from 2% in the spring)(5). *Inulin* is a pre-biotic sugar, meaning that it provides food for the healthy strains of bacteria found in the gut. Healthy gut function is essential for a good immune system. An optimally functioning liver and a healthy gut will give you a great foundation for the autumn and winter flu season too.

Imagine! All of this healing potential found in a “weed”. That’s why I say: “Don’t spray your lawn- just eat it!

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