

## Invaders of the Garden - Dandelions *by Crystal Stinson*

The battle against dandelions is a tough one. Dandelions (*Taraxacum officinale*), are an aggressive weed that can take over a patch of land in just a few years— their deep, regenerating taproots combined with their prolific seed production makes the dandelion a formidable opponent for any gardener.

Controlling dandelions without the use of chemicals can be challenging – but it is possible - with the use of some of the following tips, as well as a slight change in how we see these wild invaders.

*Tip #1* – Dig them out – snapping the top off won't do much to slow down a dandelion due to its ability to regenerate, but if you can pull out the entire tap root, then you have a fighting chance. You can use a tool specially made for this task – it looks like a screwdriver shaped like a fish tail, or I've found a flat screwdriver works well too. Just slide the tool down beside the plant and give it a bit of a turn to pop out the plant. This is much easier if the soil is moist.

*Tip #2* – Cook them – pour boiling water on the plants – in a couple days they will wither and die (This also works for ant infestations). You can also cook them by using a propane torch when they are young– but be very careful in dry weather!

*Tip #3*– Mulch them – a good healthy layer of mulch, either plastic, cardboard, or wood chips, makes it harder for weed seeds to germinate and start growing. And if dandelions do pop up through the mulch, it is easy to pull them out.

*Tip #4* – Pickle them – apply vinegar to the leaves of dandelions – this works best on young plants and older ones may need several applications.

*Tip #5* – Corn gluten meal – this is a by-product of milling corn, and can be used as a pre-emergent for weed control on lawns – it prevents roots from forming during germination. It should be applied about 4-6 weeks before the weeds appear. No roots, no dandelion. You may be able to find corn meal gluten at garden centers, or order online.

*Tip #6* – Improve your soil – dandelions and other weeds don't do as well if they have lots of competition from grass. Top-dress your lawn with compost to improve the soil and then over-seed with grass to crowd out the dandelions and other weeds.

Many of these tips involve a fair amount of manual labour, especially at first when you are trying to control an infestation in a neglected area. One thing to consider before spending too much time and frustration fighting the battle though, is that the dandelion may not be all bad. Dandelions are actually a very nutritious plant, being very high in vitamins A and C, and having more beta-carotene than carrots, and more potassium than broccoli or spinach. It is also high in iron and copper. The medicinal properties of the humble dandelion is a list far too long for this article, but include strengthening the liver and gall bladder, and clearing up skin problems. Every part of the dandelion is useful, from the roots that can be dried and ground to make a no-caffeine coffee substitute, to the leaves that can be eaten as a salad or cooked like spinach (rinse twice to eliminate any bitterness), to the flowers that wine can be made from. The white sap from the stems is useful in soothing the pain of sores and bee stings, and to help get rid of warts, acne and

calluses. Tea made from the leaves of dandelions can be useful in helping with ailments such as constipation, indigestion and fatigue.

A weed can be defined as a plant that is growing where it is not wanted. Maybe if instead of seeing the dandelion as an enemy that needs to be obliterated and we begin to see the positive qualities that these plants possess, they will stop being seen as weeds, and it won't be so bad to have a few dandelions in our yards.

In nature, it is diversity that makes the complex web of life strong, and the key to not letting dandelions take over, is to have a yard with healthy soil and a diversity of plants, including a little lawn and maybe even a few dandelions.