

# Growing Guide: Dandelions

In some neighborhoods, a lawn filled with dandelions is a sign of a lax homeowner who should be out there digging and spraying the pesky weeds. When did dandelions become the enemy? It wasn't always this way: Dandelions were once highly valued, and their worth is finally being rediscovered.



## Fun Facts

- The Latin name for the most common species of dandelion is *Taraxacum officinale*. The species name, *officinale*, is a Latin term given to plants that have a long history of use for their medicinal properties. The origin of the genus name, *Taraxacum*, is a bit fuzzier, possibly harkening back to an ancient Persian philosopher.
- Hold a dandelion leaf horizontally (or imagine one). Does it resemble a row of teeth? It did to someone, who gave it the common name *dent-de-lion*, French for "lion's tooth."
- The entire plant — leaves, stems, flowers, and roots — is edible.
- Dandelion greens contain vitamins A, C, E, and K, as well as calcium, potassium, iron, and manganese. They can be eaten fresh in salads, steamed, blanched, or sautéed.
- The flowers can be used to make nutritious tea and flavorful wine. The dried, roasted roots can be ground up and brewed into a caffeine-free coffee substitute.
- Practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine have used dandelions for at least a thousand years. The plants were well known by ancient Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and Anglo Saxons.
- Bees and other pollinators rely on early-blooming dandelions as a nectar source at a time when little else is in bloom.
- Dandelion blossoms can be used to make a pale yellow dye.
- Will those clouds moving in bring rain? Lore says that if rain is coming, dandelions that have gone to seed will close up around the fluffy seed ball to protect the ripening seeds, reopening when the weather clears.
- Dandelions are perennials. Their long taproots store food over the winter, providing the energy the plants need to sprout in early spring.

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- Those deep roots — the ones that make it so difficult to pull plants out of soil — serve another important purpose: They “mine” nutrients deep in the soil, bringing them closer to the surface where other, shallower-rooted plants can make use of them.
- Dandelions produce a milky white sap. Plant breeders are developing new varieties with especially abundant sap that may one day be used as in alternative types of natural rubber and latex.

## How to Grow Dandelions

Botanists disagree on how many distinct species there are in the *Taraxacum* genus — ranging from dozens to hundreds. The most familiar is the common dandelion, is *Taraxacum officinale*. If you want to use dandelions for making dye, the ones you find in the lawn or garden are fine, as long as you are sure they have not been sprayed with chemicals. If you plan to grow dandelions to eat, it’s best to plant seeds directly into a garden bed, so you can nurture them as you would any other edible.

There are many ways to grow dandelions. You can treat them as an annual, as you would other salad greens, or create a permanent planting. You can try growing some in full sun and some in part shade and compare growth rates and the flavor and tenderness of the leaves. Here are some basics to get you started.

### Choosing Varieties

Seeds for common dandelions are available online. Because the greens of the common species can get bitter as the leaves grow larger, plant breeders have introduced several named (“gourmet”) varieties touted to be less bitter, such as Vert de Montmagny. However, seeds for gourmet varieties can be difficult to find. More readily available is a plant called “Italian Dandelion,” which isn’t a dandelion at all but rather a type of chicory. The leaves are similar but larger and are touted to be less bitter, and the plant has blue flowers.

### Selecting a Site

Dandelions will grow just about anywhere! They prefer deep, well-drained soil. They thrive in full sun; however, growing plants in part shade, or giving them some shade during the hottest weather, will produce the best-tasting leaves.

### Sowing Seeds

Prepare the garden bed by removing rocks and raking soil smooth. Sow seeds directly in the garden after the last spring frost, spacing seeds about an inch apart on the soil surface and then pressing slightly to ensure good seed-to-soil contact. Don’t bury the seeds; the seeds germinate best when exposed to light. They should germinate in one to three weeks.

If you plan to use only the greens, you can grow dandelions as you would other salad greens. Sow a section every few weeks for a continuous supply of young, tender greens.

### Care

Take special care to keep the seed bed moist, using a fine mist to avoid dislodging the seeds. You may need to water daily until the

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plants are a few inches tall. Then, water as needed to keep the soil moist — consistently moist soil produces the best-tasting greens. Keep plants deadheaded to prevent seeds from maturing — unless you aspire to an entire garden of dandelions!

## Harvest

You can harvest individual leaves, or shear plants about an inch above the soil and they will regrow. The greens may start to get bitter as the weather heats up. If you plan to eat the greens raw, about a week before you plan to harvest a patch, try covering it with shade cloth, which will lightly blanch the greens, resulting in a paler color and less bitter flavor.

You also blanch leaves by dropping them into a pot of boiling water for a few seconds, and then cooling them immediately in a bowl of ice water. Use as you would cooked spinach.

## Annual or Perennial?

Although the plant is a perennial and will return year after year, some gardeners find that the flavor is optimal in the first year. They treat the plants as annuals, digging up the patch and sowing fresh seed each year. Other gardeners keep the same plants growing for years. Consider experimenting with both methods.

## A Few Words of Caution

- Never harvest dandelions without the landowner's permission. Always inquire if the area was treated in any way with pesticides or herbicides.
- Never harvest dandelions from the roadside, because automobile exhaust contains toxins that can foul plants and soil.
- The plants' milky sap can cause a rash in some people.

## Cool video:

The Secret Physics of Dandelion Seeds published by Nature Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2UbaDV9O9Q>

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