

*Taraxacum officinale* G.H. Weber ex Wiggers    common dandelion



Left—habit of plant and flowering head. Right—fruits with attached arrays of white bristles that aid in wind dispersal.

*Taraxacum officinale* is a common, weedy plant of lawns, fields, and other human-disturbed or human-manicured places. It has a basal rosette of pinnately lobed leaves and a hollow stalk that supports a single head with many small, yellow, strap-shaped flowers (the tiny flowers collectively appear to be a single, large flower). The small, seed-like fruits are borne on a common receptacle and are tipped by an elongate, narrow beak, to which are attached an array of white bristles that aid in wind dispersal. The entire plant will yield a white latex when bruised. There are three other species of *Taraxacum* that occur in the northeastern United States (*T. laevigatum*, *T. latilobum*, and *T. palustre*); however, their uses are similar and collectors need not worry about the identification. The leaves appear soon after spring gets started (i.e., April) and are best collected prior to flowering (which usually starts around mid-April to early May, depending on the latitude and elevation).

The young leaves of *Taraxacum officinale* can be eaten as a salad green and are also an excellent potherb when boiled for a few moments in water. They are extremely high in vitamin A (as well they contain other nutrients including vitamin B complex, vitamin C, and vitamin E). The leaves and other parts of the plant have been eaten by the Apache, Cherokee, Iroquois, Micmac, Ojibwa, and many other Native American tribes. As the leaves



Taproot that can be used to make a coffee-like beverage.

get older, especially after the flowers appear, they become more bitter. They can still be used as a potherb, but are more palatable boiled in several quick changes of water to remove the bitter principles. The flower buds are also excellent boiled in water. The heads containing the flowers can be eaten raw or infused to make tea. The fleshy taproots make a good coffee-like beverage. Dig the roots, clean them well, and then dry them for a time (such as on a rack over a bed of coals). Then, roast the roots on the coals to ensure they are completely dry and brittle (this also imparts a characteristic flavor to the beverage). At this point the roots can be ground or pounded using a smooth stone. A small palmful (about a tablespoon and a half) of roasted, ground root per cup of boiling water, allowed to infuse for five minutes makes a drink that is reminiscent of coffee and dark chocolate, with a somewhat bitter overtone (the bitter taste comes from the compound lactucaprin; it is not too strong and can be eliminated with dairy).

*Taraxacum officinale* can be used as a diuretic. This effect is believed to be caused by two groups of chemicals—eudesmanolides and germacranolides. Therefore, it can be used to help reduce excess fluid and play a role as an anti-inflammatory. All parts of the plant can be used for this purpose. Because of its diuretic result, this plant can also aid in alleviating the symptoms of bladder infections (it cannot cure the problem, but frequent urination helps to remove some of the bacteria). *Taraxacum* is also highly recommended for liver ailments. The flowers are especially endowed with lecithin, a nutrient that has been experimentally shown to aid the liver.