Learning Landscape: June 2018

For the Love of Dandelions

By Robin M. Huntley
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The June Landscape

After spring’s landscape revival, June is paradise – leaves and lawns are a thick green, the air is warm, and every single living thing around is thoroughly enjoying being alive. The start of summer is an explosion of life so great that it’s nearly impossible to notice the individual phenomena taking place – it comes in one beautifully orchestrated burst!

Of note in late spring and early summer is the appearance of dandelions. Taraxicum officinale, as its scientifically known, is generally considered a weed. Though not the most incredible of flowers, dandelions are some of the first blooms to dot the landscape once the weather warms, and they provide essential food to pollinators – particularly bees. In fact, intentionally leaving lawns un-mowed to allow dandelions to flourish can be essential to not only the survival of bee populations.

It’s also no secret that dandelions tend to be a favorite plant of young children. Their rapid transformation from bud to bloom to fluffy seed ball happens quickly enough for young folks to notice every stage of the process, and their plentiful patches provide plenty of hands-on learning opportunities. Dandelions can easily be collected and studied, made into chains, ripped apart for tactile pleasure, eaten, pressed and dried, etc. – the educational possibilities are endless!
Dandelion Blooms
Dandelions are incredibly resilient plants, and their blossoms exhibit some of the plant’s most incredible qualities. Dandelion blooms open in the morning and close at night, disappearing almost entirely once the sun has gone. Additionally, the plants will compensate for blooms lost to mowing or picking by thrusting forward an even greater crop of blossoms! The plant gets its name from its blooms as well, as “dandelion” originates from “dent de lion” – lion’s tooth in English!

➤ LOOK in any grassy area! Dandelions are anything but elusive in late spring and early summer. Check for fresh blooms on sunny days following a soil-moistening rain, or a few days after mowing.

➤ USE as food, for medicinal purposes, dye, or preserve as specimens for study. Dandelion flowers have a flavor similar to arugula when cooked, and can provide digestive support as a medicinal. The flowers can be used to make natural dye, or can be dried and preserved as keepsakes or for study. The stems holding up the blooms can be used to make excellent horns – simply pick, remove the bloom, and blow!
**Dandelion Greens**

Dandelion greens' length and breadth will vary depending on where they're found. Dandelions growing in well-tended lawns will generally have narrow, short leaves, while those growing freely in un-mowed fields will have longer, broader leaves. The leaves grow straight from the base of the plant, surrounding the blooms in a circle of tall, leafy greens.

- **LOOK** especially in areas where grasses have been able to grow tall. Lawn dandelions have small (and perhaps disappointing) greens, but dandelions who've grown uninhibited have large, beautifully shaped greens. Collect strategically so as not to wipe out a particularly good patch – harvest only a few leaves from each plant if you wish for the patch to remain throughout the season.

- **USE** as a regular cooking green in your kitchen! Be sure to gather only from healthy areas free from any harmful sprays, runoff, etc. Areas away from roads, parking lots, and other developed areas are safest. Dandelion greens can be sautéed, used in salads, fried, or eaten any other way that you'd normally enjoy leafy greens.

**Dandelion Roots**

The roots of dandelion plants are one of the biggest reasons that those who manicure their lawns find them difficult to eliminate without pesticides. Dandelions’ deep, strong taproots point straight down into the earth, holding them sturdily in place. These taproots can even produce new plants if their original growth is removed but the root is left behind.

- **LOOK** at the base of any dandelion plant! Dandelion roots are easiest to unearth with the help of a shovel, as they run quite deep. Dig a shovel into the ground a few inches away from the plant and scoop up the root along with the soil that’s attached. Gently shake the plant to remove excess soil. Dandelion roots are easiest to harvest in areas where soil is quite soft.

- **USE** as a medicinal or as dye. In either case, harvested roots can be cleaned and dried before use. For tea, allow to boil and steep for at least 15 minutes for full flavor. For dye, boil and soak for quite a while (perhaps days) and use to produce a yellowy-tan color.
Dandelion Seeds
A favorite of young children, dandelions gone to seed are nothing short of magical. The seeds that make up each magical white puffball are actually the dandelion’s fruit, produced thanks to pollination – the result of a beautiful symbiotic relationship with pollinators!

➡️ LOOK in places where dandelions haven’t been frequently mowed. Seed balls are most plentiful after a string of warm and sunny weather, and will be most intact after such weather as well.

➡️ USE to make wishes, bring magic, and study seed dispersal. Gently blowing on the seed balls makes the seeds float away – use it as an opportunity to learn about how plants propagate and travel! Seeds can be collected for cultivation of a dandelion patch of your own, too.
June Resources

The collection of resources listed below can be used to spark, support, or continue studies related to learning about dandelions, spring/summer blooms, and their role in the local landscape.

**Literature Guide: A Seed is Sleepy**
https://hilltownfamilies.wordpress.com/2015/10/27/literary-guide-17/
Our guide to Diana Hutts Aston and Sylvia Long’s *A Seed is Sleepy* serves as a resource for learning about seed anatomy, seed growth and production, and seed dispersal. The book and its accompanying guide can be used to accompany a dandelion lifecycle study, allowing readers to link their knowledge of dandelion seeds to new knowledge of other seeds as well.

**UMass Extension Turf Program: Dandelions in Lawns**
https://ag.umass.edu/turf/fact-sheets/dandelions-in-lawns
This guide to dandelions details the specifics of the species’ survival and growth patterns, and also includes information about a variety of types of management. Regardless of your intention to manage your dandelions (or not!), the guide serves as a resource for learning about dandelions’ ways. Exploring the methods that are used to eradicate the plant can illuminate its secrets to growing strong and sticking around. They’re incredibly resilient!

**DIY Dandelion Crown**
Learn how to weave dandelions into a beautiful creation! Once you’ve mastered one method of crown-making, use your newfound expertise to try out different methods. Crown-making is a great way for children to build dexterity, mathematical thinking (patterns!), and problem solving skills.

**16 Ways to Eat Dandelions**
https://www.theprairiehomestead.com/2014/04/dandelion-recipes.html
Go gather and get cooking! These recipes cover blooms, greens, and roots, and provide a variety of offerings from tea to pizza, pesto to jelly, cookies to quesadillas! In addition to providing a way to eat healthy foraged food, cooking with dandelions gives children the opportunity to learn kitchen skills.