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How to control dandelions

The hardy weed can be tough to keep out of your garden



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Ask a Master Gardener

Question: My lawn is sprouting dandelions all over. What's the best way to control these weeds?

Answer: Dandelions, *Taraxacum officinale*, are a native to Eurasia, but can be found anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere.

Their name "dandelion" means "lion's tooth," possibly referring to its jagged, deeply lobed leaves. Though their bright yellow blooms can be a pretty sight in spring, when they pop up in lawns, their popularity seems to take a downward turn.

The first thing to understand about dandelions is that they are a very successful perennial weed. Their success is due to a number of factors. Their very long tap root, which can be 6-18 inches long, has the ability to regrow even if only small pieces of the root remain after attempts to dig it out. The fleshy root allows the plant to survive drought and competition with other weeds, as well as enabling it to thrive even in poor soil conditions. Dandelions can withstand frost and freezes and tolerate crowding.

And then there's their distinctive globe-shaped seed heads – each plant producing up to 20,000 viable seeds. Each seed has a feathery parachute of soft, white hairs making it easily carried by the wind. Dandelions bloom almost throughout the year, when they emerge from the previous year's overwintered plants.

So controlling dandelions can be quite a challenge, to say the least.

Actually, it's interesting to note that all parts of



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the dandelion are edible. Indeed, the young leaves are often used in salads. The leaves are high in calcium, potassium and iron, and most flavorful in early spring before the first flower buds appear. The roots have a turnip-like flavor and the blossoms, if picked in early spring and used immediately, are quite tasty.

If you should give dandelions a try in your kitchen, be sure to wash all parts of them thoroughly as well as verifying that they haven't been treated by chemicals. Also note that dandelion sap contains latex, so if you have a latex allergy – best to avoid handling these weeds.

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So back to your question of dandelion control. Dandelions generally become a problem in lawns that are not growing vigorously enough to out-compete the weeds. Creating a thick, healthy lawn by using a regular fertilizer application, de-thatching, to reduce compaction, watering deeply and mowing the grass at the proper height will keep weeds from starting in the first place.

If you only have a few dandelions in your lawn

area, using mechanical control might be the best option. Use a digging tool inserted into the ground along the tap root to pop the whole plant out. This works best if the soil is moist enough to allow removal of several inches of root, if not the entire root. Remember to get at least 4-5 inches below the crown to discourage the root from regrowing. Also cut off the flowers to keep them from going to seed.

If they are pervasive in your lawn, the best time to chemically treat them is in the fall when the plant is transferring sugars from the leaves down into the roots for winter storage. Broadleaf products such as 2,4-D, Dicamba, MCPP, or Triclopyr (brush killer) are very effective and don't kill grasses. You can also spot treat individual plants with these products if dandelions are fewer in number in a well-managed lawn. With all herbicides, be sure and read the label, and mix and apply according to the label directions.

Herbicides containing glyphosate as an ingredient, such as Roundup,



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are not a good choice for dandelions as the product will knock back the leaves, but not the root, which will regenerate eventually. Remember that broadleaf herbicides will kill many plants, not just weeds. So keep these products that are absorbed through the root system away from shallow-rooted trees and shrubs to prevent injury.

Again, read and follow the label.

Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at ask.extension.org/ask. Presently, the plant clinic is closed until further notice due to public safety orders.