

Do it Yourself Homesteading

How to Eat Dandelions



By Erica Olson for Deep Roots

If you're looking for local food, how much more local can it get than your own back yard? Dandelions are one of the most versatile - and abundant - wild crops available. Nearly everything can be consumed, from the leaves to the root to the sunny yellow blossoms. They are extremely high in vitamins A and K and are a good source of vitamin C, calcium, riboflavin, vitamin B-6, and iron. Dandelions have been used medicinally for hundreds of years, particularly as a gentle diuretic.

So why isn't everyone eating dandelions?**Ah, how bitter, my love?**

Dandelions are on the bitter end of the taste spectrum due to the presence of sesquiterpenes, a class of water-soluble chemicals; just how bitter they are depends upon the amount of sesquiterpenes. Most tutorials on dandelion greens will direct people towards harvesting very young leaves, usually before the flowers form. This is because there are less sesquiterpenes in rapidly-growing leaves, but make no mistake—they're still there. Dandelions, being the stubborn plants that they are, will often seem to bloom the exact same day they first appear above ground, making timing difficult. The amount of moisture, sunlight, and soil conditions also affect the degree of bitterness.

What's a forager to do?**Eating the greens**

If, like most people, you are targeting the leaves for consumption, there are several different ways you can eat dandelions. You can just pick 'em out of the ground and eat them raw by the handful, but for most people, the bitter taste is too strong. To make dandelion greens more palatable, you can use them as an accent, blanch them, and/or add strongly competing flavors.

As an accent, the bitterness of dandelion greens becomes a strength rather than a liability. Chop raw leaves into small pieces and add them to a mixed salad with other, more mild-tasting greens. Sliced carrots, apples, or oranges all have a sweetness that is complemented by the robust taste of the uncooked greens. To keep the bitterness from overwhelming your salad, keep dandelion greens at 20% or less of the total.



To blanch your dandelion greens, get a pot of water and put it on to boil. After the water gets going, throw in your greens and let them boil for 3-5 minutes. Sesquiterpenes are water-soluble, so they will leach into the cooking water. The water-soluble vitamins in the dandelions will also leach into the water, but the leaves will still retain plenty of other nutrients. (There are a lot of suggestions for this post-blanching water when cooled, including drinking it as a tonic or using it to water your houseplants/garden.) Some reports suggest up to two or three rounds of blanching to pull the bitterness out; others say that simply boiling longer will do the trick. See what works best for you.

Raw or cooked, dandelion greens are best served up with other complementary flavors, particularly sweet, pungent, or fat. Some recipes call for wilting the raw greens by pouring hot bacon grease over them (and then serving them with diced bacon!). Others suggest a vinegar-based dressing for a salad or adding chopped hard-boiled eggs. Sautéed greens with onion and garlic are popular, or throwing them into soups to cook. I've even seen a recipe for dandelion-leaf pesto, where the cheese, garlic, and oil serve to mellow the bitterness of the greens.

Dandelion flowers

As mentioned, the greens are far from the only edible part of the dandelion. Dandelion blossoms do not contain sesquiterpenes, so they can be more user-friendly to the novice forager. The flowers can be plucked apart, the raw petals sprinkled on salads or as a garnish atop sautéed greens.

Dandelion flowers can be used for far more than a simple garnish, though. The blossoms can be eaten whole in fritters (either individually or en masse) or dipped in an egg wash and deep-fried. For dandelion "burgers," petals are mixed with a little egg and flour, formed into patties, and skillet-fried. There are recipes that incorporate petals in soups, frittatas, breads, and more. Ray Bradbury fans will already be familiar with the idea of dandelion wine, and the flowers can be made into other sweet treats like syrup or jelly.

Plucking the petals can be a little confusing and time-consuming at first. The simplest technique is to hold the

heads of the blossoms at the green base, pinch firmly, and roll your finger and thumb back and forth, spinning the flower between them. This loosens the petals enough so you can pluck them easily. Some people suggest picking the dandelions before the blooms are fully open; this way, the petals are all facing the same way, which makes them easier to grasp. It takes an average of 50 blossoms for a cup of petals.

At the root of it all

To many gardeners, the most frustrating part of a dandelion is its long, tough taproot. The knowledgeable forager, though, will know that this part of the dandelion is just as edible as the rest.

Like the leaves, dandelion roots contain sesquiterpenes, so they also have a bitter flavor to them. This makes them a good pairing with sweeter vegetables, such as parsnips or sweet potatoes. Older, larger dandelions generally have tougher roots; many people prefer to parboil these first. For an unusual locavore side dish, try sautéing the roots in olive oil with some sliced onions and serve with tamari or soy sauce.

Dandelion roots can be used to brew tisanes (teas) or used as a coffee substitute. For a stronger chicory flavor, slowly roast chopped roots in the oven as you dry them: spread chopped roots on a baking pan and cook them at 250 degrees with the oven door open a couple of inches. Make sure to stir the roots every fifteen minutes or so to prevent burning! The process will take an hour or two to completely dry the roots, but once the moisture has evaporated and the roots have cooled, they can be stored just about indefinitely. To use, simply boil the dried roots in a pot of water on the stove or grind and use in your coffeemaker.

Sourcing your dandelions

If you decide you want to give eating dandelions a try, please be careful about where you get them. Although dandelions are ubiquitous, it is never a good idea to harvest them from an area that undergoes pesticide or herbicide treatment. Roadside-growing dandelions should not be consumed either, as they can absorb pollutants from car exhaust. For obvious reasons, dandelions growing in dog parks probably ought to be avoided as well.

So where to from here?

The next time your kids are bugging you for something to do, or you've been invited to last-minute neighborhood barbecue and need to bring something to share, keep the humble dandelion in your thoughts. The internet has a plethora of sites with recipes, but one of my favorites is www.eattheweeds.com. The recipes are wider-ranging than most of the ones you'll find online, but searching "dandelion [whatever food you want to try]" should give you plenty of hits, too. Happy eating!

