May Dye Plant of the Month: Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)

By Janet Bare

Plant Family: Compositae, Composite Family (also called Asteraceae)

Description: Herbaceous perennial with a fleshy taproot and a milky latex sap. Stems absent. Leaves in a basal rosette, oblanceolate in outline, strongly toothed, with triangular lobes often angled toward the leaf base. Flowering heads solitary at the end of bare stalks, with 40-80 yellow ray flowers, blooming from spring into fall.

Origin and Current Range: Native to Eurasia, now naturalized throughout North America, southern Africa, South America, New Zealand, Australia, and India and found in many other areas. It is a problem plant in lawns and some agricultural crops. (or you might view it as a “free”, “volunteer” dye plant!)

Reproduction and Cultivation: Reproduces by seed, which may remain viable for up to 9 years. No need to cultivate it intentionally!

Dye Color and Parts Used for Dye: Fresh flowers, leaves, or flowers and leaves can be used to achieve yellows, light greens, brownish-greens or beige in wool, depending on the mordant used and whether using the flowers alone or with the leaves. Plant parts can be harvested throughout the growing season. Some sources describe the use of the roots as well, although results seem to be quite mixed. Dried flowers can be used, but use half the amount of plant material as when using fresh flowers.

Other Information: Dandelions have contractile roots that pull the plant deep into the soil, leaving the new leaves just at the soil surface (and consequently making it harder to dig the roots up). Dandelion greens are high in vitamins A, B, C and D, as well as zinc, iron and potassium. The roots have been roasted and used as a coffee substitute, the flowers are used to make dandelion wine, and the leaves can be used as salad greens. The scientific name of the genus “*Taraxacum*” is derived indirectly from Medieval Persian writings on pharmacy. The species name “officinale” (meaning ‘workshop’ or ‘pharmacy’) also reflects the plant’s use for medicinal purposes. The first recorded use of the plant was in Arabia in the 10th century.

According to the University of Maryland Medical Center web site (ref. 7),

“In the past, dandelion roots and leaves were used to treat liver problems. Native Americans also boiled dandelion in water and took it to treat kidney disease, swelling, skin problems, heartburn, and upset stomach. In traditional Chinese medicine, dandelion has been used to
treat stomach problems, appendicitis, and breast problems, such as inflammation or lack of milk flow. In Europe, it was used in remedies for fever, boils, eye problems, diabetes, and diarrhea.

So far, there have not been any good quality scientific studies on dandelion. Today, the roots are mainly used to stimulate the appetite, and for liver and gallbladder problems. Dandelion leaves are used as a diuretic to help the body get rid of too much fluid”.

See more about their uses as medicines and as edible plants in refs. 10 and 11. The leaves provide food for several butterflies and moths, the flowers are important sources of nectar for bees, and the seeds are a food source for some birds.

Last but not least,

“...the Fraunhofer Institute for Molecular Biology and Applied Ecology (IME) in Germany developed a cultivar that is suitable for commercial production of natural rubber. The latex produced exhibits the same quality as the natural rubber from rubber trees.[42] In collaboration with Continental Tires, IME is building a pilot facility. As of May 2014, the first prototype test tires made with blends from dandelion-rubber are scheduled to be tested on public roads over the next few years.[43].” (refs. 8 and 11)

Note to reader: Please see the following resources and annotations for significantly more details, illustrations, etc., than what I have summarized above.

References:


9. USDA Plants Database: http://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=TAOF#
