

Still the Dandelions Come

By Lynne Golodner

They grew up and out, gripping the soil, fanning in circles of soft jagged leaves like neck ruffles on Victorian royalty. Perfectly symmetrical, actually beautiful. Like art. Some small, some large, ready for picking, for cooking, for fermenting. But we don't eat dandelions from the yard, though I'll buy them from the farmers market in a bunch, cleaned and beautiful in their feather lightness and elegant length. At home, we only harvest what we choose to grow, not what pushes through on its own, in spite of us.

Perhaps it's a modern mindset that limits my perspective. I was not raised to forage for my survival, to learn local plants and cultivate what comes easily or within reach.

Dandelions litter the garden. Every year, all season long, I pull them out, toss them in a lawn bag for disposal. But why? They grow and they grow, offering vitamins, nutrients and perennial goodness just for me to hack them out, rejecting their simple, easy offering.

Last Mother's Day, my daughter Eliana said we should do something together to celebrate, like a forest hike. I wanted to dig up the grass and double the size of my garden. "Help me dig," I said. She put on flimsy white tennis shoes and jumped on the edge of a shovel to push it into the hard ground. "I'm only doing this because it's Mother's Day," she said, sweat glistening along her temples.

The dandelions, bright green and hardy, grew up through the toughest corners – where concrete paving blocks lay next to an electrical outlet, in the crevices between garden and grass. They had grit and endurance, bursting through hard earth, clinging to soil, reluctant to be removed. My shovel could only attack at certain angles.

Taraxacum, the genus known more generally as the dandelion, is one of the most common plants in the world, edible in its entirety, from yellow flower down to the hard roots. One of the most vital early spring sources of nectar for pollinators, dispersing over great distances, carried on the wind.

"Why don't we eat them?" Eliana asked. "Why not these?" I dropped the fans of leaves into a paper bag, searching for a good answer. So this fall, when I pulled up the garden to prepare the earth for winter, I gazed at the newest dandelions – so many symmetrical leaves, artful in their points and right-angled cuts along each narrowing shaft – and wondered why I work so hard to throw them away.

In fifth grade at Forest Elementary School, classes suspended for field day. It was brisk spring, when the air has a nip, but the ground is thawing and a gray sky

promises future sun. My frizzy hair pulled into pigtails, my jeans with rolled cuffs because my mother refused to shorten them as I'd just grow taller. We had two days off classes, and lots of events to compete in and learn about the natural world – foot races and forest walks and art projects involving leaves and thick paper. I was in a group tasked with making dandelion salad. “You can eat them,” a teacher said, but I didn't believe her.

Scientists say dandelions evolved over more than 30 million years, and humans have consumed them for a long time – as nutrition, as medicine, as a healing tea, in traditional Chinese medicine and in the Native American palate.

We set off along the sloping field and into the adjacent forest as well as into the yards of houses that bordered the school grounds. And when we pulled the dandelions from the hard earth, the teacher tore the leaves the same way my mother shredded lettuce and tossed it in a bowl to drizzle with oil and vinegar and sprinkle salt over top. “Good enough to eat,” she said, and I tasted them and was surprised by the tang and the bite.

This fall, it took all of a day to pull out everything growing in my garden. Nine tomato plants thick at the base and deep in the soil, stalks reaching in all directions. Some leaves had started to brown, and hard green orbs clung to the branches but refused to ripen. I bent the branches to fit them into bags, tossing metal cages onto the grass to organize later. I raked the soil smooth for the coming slumber of winter.

The raw greens are rich with vitamins A, C and K, calcium, potassium, iron, manganese and lutein. The flowers contain phytochemicals including polyphenols, and the roots offer inulin. Every piece of the plant has value, from the seeds floating through the neighborhood to the roots which can be roasted into a coffee alternative.

I had crowded in so many plants that the cucumber vines snaked through the garden, choking the eggplant, which didn't grow to full height until late August, after the cucumbers turned yellow and withered. I pulled at long vines of rotted vegetables, reeling them into the trash. Too late, I noticed two budding zucchinis, which might have grown fatter before the last warm day if I had left them.

Spotting one budding eggplant, I left the soft leaves and lavender flowers, hoping the last few warm days of full sun would sprout new fruit before the frost. I left the lavender, too, which neither grew bigger nor shrank all summer, and hoped it might weather our harsh, gray winters and become a perennial with promise. I doused the banana plant near the hedge, hoping it might live through the cold and bloom.

Once, I drank dandelion wine in an Amish village somewhere on the road between home and away, with an older lover. I was in my twenties, eager to wander and explore. The wine was syrupy thick, too sweet, even then, when sugar was magnetic.

When I married the first time, we bought into a farm share that delivered a box of produce every week of the growing season. I learned to cook the bitter greens of beets and bake them into a pie with cheese and eggs. And one day, long after that marriage ended, I started buying long, clean dandelion leaves bound together with a rubber band at the farmers market. It never occurred to me to cull them from my yard, from the rich soil of my garden. I cooked them in a skillet with olive oil, garlic, salt and the juice of half a lemon. Sometimes, I zested lemon peel over top. The kids never liked the bitterness, but I felt like I was returning to some hidden part of myself, close to the land and unafraid of what grows near my home.

Found on six continents and part of virtually every menu in history, it grows back despite all efforts to kill it.

But come fall, I return to habit, digging out pernicious weeds, persistent plants that refuse to give over control. Even as I wrested them free of the cloying ground, digging until my hand closed around the hard white roots, I wanted to double-back, to give them their due, show respect for the hardiest among us.

The next week, three deer came, a doe and two fawns. Their graceful heads bobbed – we'd let the grass be overtaken by wild strawberry and clover, a fine meal for wild mammals. They munched at the bushes and trees, pulling leaves between their teeth. When I stepped outside, the mother deer lay on the ground, flanks folded beneath her, ears alert and twitching. She stared at me, and I backed into the house.

"You win," I said.

For hours, she lounged on my ground, nibbling. After five, my husband came home. The doe watched, listened. When his car lumbered into the garage, when the door lifted with a thunderous thwack-thwack, her ears twitched and she tensed at our soft steps, at the swish of his car door closing. I waved for him to follow me into the yard.

"You've had long enough," I said. She stood, staring right at me, daring me closer. Dan flapped his arms. "Go on now," he called.

We stepped deeper into the yard, peered around the back of the brick garage, where her fawns stood, watching, waiting for mother's lead. The banana plant had withered and shrunk into itself, the ends of the leaves nibbled to nubs. The mother leaped over the back fence, and the babies followed.

I could see the outline of the mother's ribs through her fur. I had left her alone all day to make use of what is abundant. Somebody should. Animals know.

It's a good day when I play in the yard. This year, everything burst forth under the rainbow spray of cold water, under blazing sun, under varying days when I couldn't tell what season was really upon us.

When I moved into this house, the back yard was littered with debris. Fallen trees, heaps of dead leaves and at its center, an overgrown sculpted hedge surrounded by thorny roses, pretty things with no purpose, and the refuse of a yard growing in on itself. Our children were little, so we pulled out the thorny plants and hacked the bushes to the ground, feeding the soil and erecting a fence so we could plant vegetables and keep pests away. There are rats in this neighborhood, but I've never seen them, though raccoons, possum, chipmunks and squirrels abound.

Year after year, I plant the garden and bask in the glory of budding fruit and sprouting leaves. My hands press the damp soil, and I breathe in the heady scent of all that is natural. I think I am cultivating nourishment, but really, the world has a way of regenerating itself despite me.

I pull at what we call weeds, pests, reverting to the bias of my youth. A weed is a "plant not valued for use or beauty," but everything has a purpose. My fifth-grade teacher tried to tell me that we could live on what grows wild, but I was raised to believe in store-bought and pre-packaged.

The other day, I wondered if I could sit beside the deer and have a conversation. I'd like to talk with someone who just knows in her body how to live in this world.