

# DANDELIONS

*“Unless you tear them out by the roots or use weed pesticides ... you can’t get rid of them.”* STEPHEN DARBYSHIRE, AGRICULTURE CANADA

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Dandelions may be the bane of homeowners who are obsessed with maintaining an immaculate lawn, but they’re far less troublesome than many other weeds, biologist Stephen Darbyshire says: “Ask a mother in Westmount who has a kid with allergies, and she’ll tell you ragweed is the biggest problem.” DARIO AYALA GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

## THE SEASON OF YELLOW FEVER

Story by MARK CARDWELL Special to The Gazette

**FOR ME, GROWING UP ON A FARM** meant never having to pull a dandelion in anger.

Grazing livestock, which love the bittersweet taste of the dandelion’s nutrient-packed leaves and flowers, devoured the ones that grew in the fields and around the barn by the mouthful.

The ones that managed to grow among the many species of broadleaf and grassy weeds and wildflowers that competed for space in the five-acre lawn/field around our house were cut with a riding mower. It was often driven by friends I’d invite over, Tom Sawyer style, when the grass needed a trim.

Then there was old Henry, a nearby farmer and family friend who every spring made batches of dandelion wine, the first alcohol I ever tried.

And who hasn’t experienced the youthful thrill that comes from blowing the plant’s fluffy white seeds up into a warm springsky?

I like to think those memories were the reason I stood idly by for years as dandelions took almost complete control of the small yard in front of my own family’s home on a quiet residential street near Quebec City.

My wife blamed my inaction on laziness (which explains the T-shirt she gave me once for Father’s Day with a picture of a guy lying down by a lawn mower with the caption “I fought the lawn and the lawn won”) and a rebellious streak as long as a country mile.

I admit that I got some devilish delight in the fact that our dandelion-choked yard didn’t sit well with some of our neighbours, many of whom are retired and maintain plush, weed-free lawns that would make a golf-course manager green with envy.

Last fall, however, my oldest son, William, and I dug up the front yard and laid fresh sod as part of a do-it-yourself landscaping makeover on three sides of our small property.

As a result, when the first bright yellow wave of dandelions swept across our region in mid-May (a week or so after the first wave in Montreal), our front yard, for the first time in the 12 years

we’ve lived here, was a nearly immaculate monoculture of green Kentucky bluegrass.

Another result was that the springtime scowls and barbs from neighbours who sarcastically referred to our front yard as a “dandelion garden” turned to smiles and nods of approval.

Even more amazing was the fact that I found myself walking around my yard last week ripping out stray dandelions for the first time in my life with a stand-up weed puller (another Father’s Day gift/gag from years past).

What the hell happened? Well, according to University of Toronto sociologist Brent Berry, I’ve likely knuckled under to the social pressures that come with people living in proximity on modern North American urban landscapes.

“It’s all part of human nature,” says Berry, an American-born associate professor whose research focuses on urban sociology, among other things. “People strive to live in homogeneous communities where they and their neighbours conform to certain standards. Toeing the line is a social control thing (and) it’s fascinating how that manifests itself in regards to confronting nature.”

In other words, I’ve become weed-whipped.

Not that that’s a bad thing, according to Berry.

Lawns, he says, are in some ways public expressions or extensions of who we are as individuals. Messy people are more likely to have a messy yard, while fastidious individuals—especially those who are retired and have both the time and money needed to create and maintain a weed-free lawn—are likely to have, well, you know.

“Every human being likes to have control over their environment,” says Berry. “Lawns are like personal grooming.”

He adds that people who take pride in their personal appearance are very likely to be the ones who make the most effort to create pristine environments both inside and outside their homes.



Dandelions are among the most resilient plants on Earth, surviving and thriving in sometimes inhospitable conditions. The leaves and flowers are close to the ground, making them less vulnerable to the cold and to lawn-mower blades. MARCOS TOWNSEND GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

“Lawns are a perfect example of that,” he says, “(and) dandelions, like all weeds, are seen as blemishes that need to be controlled or eliminated.”

When it comes to dandelions, however, that’s easier said than done.

An invasive species that is believed to have been brought to the New World by

banned everywhere now, you can’t get rid of them,” says Stephen Darbyshire, a weed biologist and research scientist with Agriculture Canada.

According to Darbyshire, the dandelion is a fascinating plant with many unique characteristics that make it a model of proliferation.

Like many weeds, it propa-

lodge, as I’ve learned.

“They store large sugar reserves in the roots,” says Darbyshire. “That allows them to mobilize fast when the snow melts, and explains why they are one of the first flowers out in early May.”

This makes them a crucial food source for bees, he adds, not to mention all manner of wildlife, including large mammals like deer and bears.

“They flower before the fruit trees and other pollen producers,” says Darbyshire. “Beekeepers love them.”

One titillating biological feature about dandelions, he adds, is that they are apomictic, meaning they reproduce asexually and without fertilization—a rarity among flowering plants.

Though they will continue to seed all summer long, Darbyshire says the plants “at some point switch their resource allocation from reproduction to food storage in the root, which prepares them to be first out of the gate next year.”

He also credits the plant’s above-ground growth characteristics for its stunning success as a lawn invader. Notably, the leaves and flowers grow low to the ground. That allows them to stay clear of springtime cold air and the whirling blades of modern lawn mowers.

“They are devilish little buggers,” Darbyshire says, chuckling.

The problem, he adds, isn’t really dandelions, which are competing for space with other weeds and grasses and even trees like maples and cedars. “It’s the fact that we manage our landscapes to promote one species over another,” he says.

While a problem for some, notably farmers who use no-tillage systems and grounds managers of golf courses and sports fields, Darbyshire says dandelions are far less troublesome than poison ivy, poison oak, hogweed or many other weeds.

“Ask a mother in Westmount who has a kid with allergies, and she’ll tell you ragweed is the biggest problem,” he says. “And I doubt a dairy farmer who has to buy hay because the St. John’s wort in his fields is poisoning his cattle would put dandelions high up on a bad-weed list, either.”

He says dandelions have been getting a bum rap in recent decades.

According to Darbyshire

and other sources, dandelions were among the earliest plants to be cultivated and harvested by farmers at the dawn of agriculture in Europe. Its flowers, for example, were and still are used for pickling and to make dandelion beer and wine, like the type made by old Henry the farmer.

The leaves of younger plants, in particular, are also eaten raw in salads or used in soups and omelettes.

The roots, once dried and ground, are still used as a coffee substitute in some cultures.

Even the milky white juice in the stalk, which contains complex alkaloids, is believed to have been used to make primitive medicines in ancient Celtic Europe.

A known diuretic that, when consumed, stimulates the kidneys (hence its French name, pissenlit, which literally means “to wet in bed”), the dandelion (whose English name is actually derived from the French description of the jagged ends on its yellow mane-like flowers—dents de lion) is still used by homeopaths and herbalists in products intended to enhance liver function and bile secretion and to serve as a pick-me-up when feeling blue.

Canada Health warns, however, that people with a gallstone condition should consult a physician before consuming some of the approximately 50 dandelion-related products that are available in health food and other specialty food stores across Canada.

Getting back to dandelions in the yard, Darbyshire says homeowners who are obsessed with maintaining a carpet of grass for a lawn have two choices.

One is to call in a lawn-care company or buy organic weed-killing products that will provide a quick but temporary fix for what some people perceive as a dandelion problem.

The other is to pull them out manually.

“That’s the true and tested method,” Darbyshire says. “It’s time-consuming, but it gives you good exercise, it’s free and it gets you in touch with your lawn and nature—and that’s a good thing.”

Another interesting thing about dandelions ... oh, sorry, I have to go.

I just saw one growing on my front yard.