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GARDEN NOTES

TAKE THE BITE OUT OF LION'S TEETH (DANDELIONS)

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Dandelion sounds a little less fearsome than its Old French origin that is translated as "tooth of the lion." It's an herb, a salad green and featured ingredient in dandelion wine which is said to taste like "drinking sunshine."

"For most people it is a pain-in-the-lawn," says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. "I have to give dandelions credit, though, because they certainly have developed a knack for survival. Not only are they a perennial with a deep root system that persists through many adverse conditions, they also have a unique seed dispersal mechanism.

"This includes a clever visual lure that attracts any passing child. The seed head begs to be picked, then the young, innocent child is sucked into the evil flower's wicked plot as they whimsically blow the dreadful seeds around the neighborhood. The wind also helps a little."

So, how do we win a war against a weed that draws on the innocence of youth to help achieve its malicious designs?

The most important key is keeping the good lawn plants as healthy and thick as possible, Goodspeed says. This includes applying a fertilizer high in nitrogen to provide the lawn with enough nutrients so it can compete with any weed that tries to invade its domain.

Another method for avoiding dandelions or any other weed is to mow the lawn as tall as you can stand, he says. Leave most lawns between 2 ½ and 3 inches tall. By keeping the lawn tall, above the dandelions and other broadleaf weeds, the grass shades the weeds from the sunshine. Mowing the lawn too short actually increases the likelihood of weeds because more light reaches the soil and allows the weed seeds to germinate and grow.

Watering the lawn appropriately is another important technique to avoiding weeds, he adds. Don't water every day. This simply weakens the turf, in most cases, and gives weeds the advantage. Try to water deeply and as infrequently as possible. If the lawn develops deeper roots from deeper watering, it will be healthier and better able to whip those nasty dandelions.

A healthy, thick lawn will out-compete most weeds--even dandelions, Goodspeed says. However, some weeds are tough enough to survive and thrive, even after we have done everything we can to make the lawn as aggressive as possible. If this is the case, there are still a couple of options.

First, physically remove the dandelions, he suggests. Many tools on the market are specifically designed to remove these weeds from the lawn and flowerbeds. Most have a deep probe that goes into the soil to loosen and remove their long tap root. Removing weeds the day after it rains or after an irrigation cycle will help you get as much of the root as possible.

As a last resort, dandelions can be killed using a broadleaf herbicide, Goodspeed says. The best time to control dandelions is right now and again in the fall. Applying a broadleaf killer early in the spring usually only weakens dandelions. It is also important to apply broadleaf weed killers before the day-time temperature reaches 85 degrees or higher. Once the temperature exceeds 85 degrees the chemicals can volatilize and cause more problems than they help.

For more information, contact your local USU County Extension office.

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