

Nature note: in praise of 'lions' teeth'

If spring has a colour it must be yellow. The first butterfly on the wing is the brimstone, which may have given the 'butter-fly' its name from the lovely butter-yellow colours on those broad floaty wings. And the first flowers of the year are nearly all yellow, if you think about it, starting with the old gold of the aconite and followed by the fresher, brighter colours of the yellow crocus, the daffodil, and celandine and then the milky yellow of the primrose and cowslip and the bold brilliance of the dandelion. Dandelion a flower? Isn't that a weed? No,



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Dandelion field in Estonia

not at all – have you seen the swathes of roadside dandelions in the grass verges at present?

They look like a million little suns. A million, million if you go to a country like Estonia at this time of year, where they sensibly spend much less on herbicides to sanitise their countryside than we do. Every road there is bordered with thickly clustered gold medallions, a glorious sight, far outshining the neatly cultivated borders of any municipal park. These wild dandelions are not a bit like the cramped little flat rosettes that press down tightly to the ground in your lawn to avoid the mower. These are fancy free, nodding their heads like Wordsworth's daffodils, with fine upstanding jagged green leaves.

The leaves give them their name of course: dent de lion or *lion's tooth* and they have long been valued in their own right for both medicinal and culinary purposes. They were important ingredients in Chinese herbal remedies and were sent over to America in the *Mayflower* with the first pilgrims. In the nineteenth century dandelions were often grown in greenhouses as a winter substitute for lettuce in salads and ladies used to serve them in sandwiches at their tea parties between thin slices of brown bread. Worth a try, WI? As health foods they were especially valued for flushing out toxins in the kidneys and helping to prevent gout in the port-drinking classes. Worth a try, gentlemen?

And a little later in the year, when the golden flower heads give way to those perfect balls of feather-down seeds (about 180 per head on average) they become children's toy clocks. The number of blows you need to remove all the seeds and send them off down the breeze is supposed to give you the hour of the day – if you believe in it enough.

But everything in moderation. The long white dandelion roots are said to make very good de-caffeinated coffee if roasted; but they also have a reputation as diuretics, hence the other French name of *pissenlit*.

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