

Originally published in the March, 2008, issue of the **Active Page**:

Exploring Our Little Corner of the World with the Galiano Naturalists

by Louise Decario

Another spring tonic: Dandelions

Some of my earliest memories are to do with dandelions. In the spring, I remember well tagging along with my mother as she harvested dandelions for the “chickens” but then later finding the choice tender hearts in the family’s evening salad. Even at a young age, I enjoyed the tangy bitterness of the freshly picked greens dressed with Italian vinaigrette.

A little later in the year, what fun it was sitting on the warm grass and turning the bright yellow flowers into necklaces, bracelets and crowns of glory. Games were fun, too. Who could snap the flower head the farthest? Who likes butter? Who could make the longest chain without it breaking? Who could make the loudest trumpet from the partially peeled back stem? These activities have been passed on from generation to generation and are, indeed, a delight for the young spirit.

The word dandelion comes from the French name *dent de lion*. This means lion’s tooth and refers to the jagged edges of the leaf. The other French name for this plant, and not so well known, is *pissenlit*. In English this means “wet the bed”. This is an appropriate name for dandelions because their greens when eaten act as a mild diuretic. Not recommended for a bedtime snack!

Mum was right. Dandelions are good for you. They are high in nutrients and minerals. Full of iron, copper, potassium, calcium, magnesium and vitamin A and C, they are just the tonic one needs at the end

of winter. Dandelions are 100% edible – the leaves, the roots, the flowers. Tender young green leaves are best, and are tasty in a salad, stir fried, or boiled like spinach. The roots can be dried, ground and used as a coffee substitute or parboiled like parsnips or carrots, then fried in butter. The flowers have been used for centuries to make an interesting white wine.

Do you have warts? Here’s an old time folk remedy. Apply the sticky white sap from the stem of the flower to the wart. This was believed to cure warts. It’s worth a try.

Humans aren’t the only ones to use dandelions as food. Bees and other insects use the pollen in the flower as an important food source from spring to fall. Wildlife (bears, deer, sheep) and domestic animals (cows, sheep, horses) munch on the greens. Small birds eat the seeds. In our yard, in spring and summer, deer seem to avoid the greens but go from plant to plant carefully picking off each yellow flower.

A cool season vegetable (herb?), dandelions wilt easily and become tough and bitter after flowering. If you’re going to try some this year, March and April are good months to begin.

Here are two recipes:

Fried Dandelion Root

1 pound dandelion root, peeled, halved lengthwise

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 tablespoons brown sugar

2 tablespoons red wine vinegar

Salt and freshly ground pepper

Chopped fresh parsley

1. Cook the dandelion root in boiling water until almost tender. Drain and cut lengthwise into ¼ inch strips.

2. *Melt butter in large skillet. Add the root and cook until lightly browned. Sprinkle with brown sugar and continue to cook until tender.*
3. *Transfer to a serving tray. Sprinkle with vinegar, salt, pepper and chopped parsley.*

Simple Vinaigrette

1 clove garlic

½ teaspoon kosher salt

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

Juice of ½ lemon

½ cup olive oil

2 teaspoons red wine vinegar

Freshly ground black pepper

* * *

Natural Mysteries

Last month's mystery was: **Why don't woodpeckers get headaches?** The next time you sit watching a pileated woodpecker chipping away at a tree - or curse it for drumming on the metal case of the electric transformer at 6 in the morning - try picturing this: Run as fast as you can face first into a wall. Do that 12,000 times a day. Call yourself a woodpecker.

How do they stand it? A thick skull, for one. And the brain is tightly bound, so it doesn't rattle around in there. Strong muscles between the beak and the head contract just before the beak hits, forming a tight shock absorbing cushion that distributes the force down away from the brain, and some rubbery cartilage at the front of the skull absorbs the residual shock. To keep the eyes from popping out, and to protect them from flying chips, the woodpecker closes the inner eyelid (nictitans), sort of a combination seat belt and safety glasses. And then there's the tongue, the long, long tongue. Rooted in the upper jaw, the tongue passes through the right nostril, then between the eyes, dividing

in two, arching around the front of the skull, around the back of the skull, down either side of the neck, coming forward through the lower jaw to reunite into a single tongue in the upper throat. Various muscles along the length of this odd structure can contract to extend the tongue a full 10 cm to reach those tasty ants in the excavated crevices. And the whole affair acts like a sling that serves as yet another shock absorber. Isn't nature grand!

This month's Natural Mystery: How many deer are there on Galiano Island?

Have an answer? Send your thoughts to galianonaturalists@gulfislands.com. Have a Natural Mystery of your own? Let us know, and we'll try to answer it.

THE GALIANO NATURALISTS are a group of curious explorers who enjoy observing, marveling, and sharing information about the natural world around us. Come join us. Visit our website at <http://gulfnet.sd64.bc.ca/GalianoNaturalists.html>.